Conserving Wildlife in Britain's Forests

By Peter Garthwaite

In the last fifty years the Forestry Commission has created 1,500,000 acres of new forests in Great Britain in addition to replanting much old woodland. This vast area has provided new and welcome habitats for wildlife, notably the red squirrel in the Breckland. The author, who was the first Wildlife Officer of the Forestry Commission, describes how in recent years the Commission has taken an increasingly active interest in the wildlife in its forests, protects the harmless animals, including badgers and the rare pine marten, makes management agreements for sites of special wildlife interest, and trains its staff in conservation and animal and plant ecology.

THE red squirrel would probably now be absent from virtually the whole of England except Brownsea Island and the Lake District if the Forestry Commission had not planted a huge tract of the East Anglian breckland with pine trees in the 1920's and 1930's. As it is the red squirrel has found a permanent habitat in the forests around Thetford, and one moreover not so far invaded by the grey squirrel, which has driven the red from some of its traditional haunts. Badgers and three species of deer also thrive in this newly created forest to an extent that has an appreciable impact on their total national populations. This is well brought out in the books of Norah Burke, in particular *The Midnight Forest*, which describes the lives of the creatures inhabiting the King's Forest which is part of Thetford Chase. Before the planting of the forest the breckland habitat, rich as it was in natural history interest, was too open to support a large population of roe deer. Now, with abundant tree cover as well as a fair proportion of open brecks still remaining, the natural annual increase of roe deer alone runs into several hundred. Moreover, some of the special animals for which these brecklands were famous, such as stone curlew, have adapted themselves to the new environment and now breed on the broad rides, in nursery areas, firebreaks and suchlike inside the forest, belying the accusations of some naturalists that they would be "ousted by the conifers".

The same story can be told about many other of the new forests, now totalling 1,500,000 acres, created by the Forestry Commission in the last 50 years, mostly on marginal uplands previously used for sheep-grazing in northern England, Wales and Scotland. This still leaves some 15,000,000 acres of upland grazings, much of which would not be suitable for economic growing of trees even if it were available for forestry. These new forests have therefore had little impact on the wild population, relatively sparse in numbers and of a limited number of species, of this huge tract of country. Where locally an important or irreplaceable habitat has been included in an area acquired for afforestation, the Commission has arranged to safeguard it.

These are all new forests created on more or less bare land. However, a considerable part of the resources of the Forestry Commission, particularly in the south of England, has been devoted to the replanting of former woodland. It is often forgotten, or has never been properly appreciated, what vast inroads were made on the standing timber resources of this country during the 1939-45 war, resources already devastated in the Great War and eroded steadily by the unrestricted felling of the inter-war years. These woodlands when acquired by the Forestry Commission were therefore devoid of timber and covered with a variety of scrub and regrowth, or contained a few trees so old and decayed that the former owners could not sell them even in a timber shortage.

The conversion of these areas to viable forests as economically as possible in under twenty years was bound to create great change both in the landscape in general, and in the woods as habitat for wildlife, especially as both economics and the needs of the country demanded the establishment over most of the area of quick-growing conifers to replace the crops of oak and beech which had been the main component of many of these woods for the previous 150 to 200 years.

Nevertheless to perpetuate the traditional landscape the Commission has consistently planted beech in such areas as the Chilterns, the North and South Downs, and the Cotswolds; and in the clays of the Midlands and the Weald, and on other appropriate sites, has planted oak, to the number of over 100,000,000 of these two species since 1950. They have been interplanted with conifers of a variety of species according to local site conditions both for protection and for some early returns to offset the long period before any revenue can come from the hardwoods. In the early stages such mixed woods are generally more suitable for wildlife than young plantations of either pure hardwoods or pure conifers, giving both quick shelter and variety of canopy, foliage and insect life.

Thus in the normal course of forest management both in the upland afforestation areas and in the lowland woods which have been replanted, the Commission is creating a permanent habitat for a wide variety of wildlife as a by-product of commercial forestry.

In recent years the Commission, realising the importance of their forests as nature reserves, and the interest shown in them by naturalists and conservationists, has clarified its policy towards wildlife for the guidance of its staff, many of whom are highly skilled field naturalists as well as foresters. The basis of this policy is:

1. The trees must be protected, but total protection is impracticable.
2. When animal populations have to be controlled in the interests of protection, selective control by the most humane methods must be employed.
3. Harmless animals such as the badger are not to be molested on Commission land either by forest staff or by sporting tenants or others.
4. Rare animals such as the pine marten are protected in Commission forests even though they have no legal protection.
5. Special provision is made to create suitable habitats for wildlife: brakes of natural vegetation are left by stream sides and other places, ponds are created for wildfowl, nesting boxes are erected in most forests – there are now over 5,000 nesting boxes in Commission forests.

6. Nature trails and field museums are established in many forests to train our own staff and for the benefit of visitors.
7. There is close co-operation, which is increasing all the time, with the Nature Conservancy, County Naturalists' Trusts, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, the British Deer Society, the Royal Entomological Society, the Council for Nature, and many local natural history societies and individuals concerned with conservation.
8. Facilities are given in Commission forests for research on wildlife and conservation to many individuals and universities and colleges; and specimens are provided to others unable to visit the forests.

There are, of course, habitats of special scientific interest within many of our forests that are of sufficient importance to justify special management plans. Where these sites are of national importance, the area is designated a Forest Nature Reserve and managed either by or in agreement with the Nature Conservancy. Sites of local importance have been handed over under licence for management by County Naturalists' Trusts. Other sites are managed in conjunction with local societies and bodies.

For several years now the Commission has run conservation courses for its own senior staff with eminent outside speakers to assist the instruction. Such courses have been duplicated at the regional (Conservancy) level to include junior staff. At the Forester Training Schools, conservation forms an important part of the curriculum. The actual work of forest protection is now passing to men who have been or are being trained in animal and plant ecology, and in conservation.

These forests are permanent. Though planted in the relatively short period of fifty years, their replacement as they mature will be an unobtrusive and undramatic change because it will be widely dispersed in time and gradual in pace. Each site differs in its growth potential, as does each tree species. So concurrent plantings will mature at widely differing times, and a relatively simple structure will give way to a more much complex one, which will be the permanent pattern. This is the pattern of sustained forestry; it provides a wide spectrum of habitats for wildlife of all kinds whether the trees are conifers or hardwoods or both. It provides continual interest for the naturalist, and a reservoir of wildlife in a landscape where, outside the forest, congenial habitats are dwindling and conditions becoming increasingly difficult. It is to create such reserves that the forester is dedicated whether he is a naturalist or not.

Seal Hunting Symposium

A ONE-DAY meeting on seal hunting in United Kingdom and Canadian waters, organised by UFAW, is to be held on Thursday, 18th January, in the meeting rooms of the Zoological Society of London, at 10 a.m. Dr. Frank Fraser Darling will be in the chair, and a new UFAW film on sealing in the Wash will be shown. Admission is by ticket only, price £1, which includes a copy of the UFAW illustrated report on sealing, morning coffee and afternoon tea, but not lunch; this will be obtainable at the Zoo restaurant and the cafeteria. Accommodation is limited and admission restricted to members of UFAW, FPS and the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust; please say of which body you are a member when applying for tickets to The Secretary, Universities Federation of Animal Welfare, 7a Lamb's Conduit Passage, London W.C.1.