

Simon Barnes – concerns of Sizewell C for local wildlife: a personal view

Since 1970 the UK bird population has dropped by 40 million. Remember the expression “common as sparrows”? That’s now obsolete. We’ve got rid of most of them: in this country, even house sparrow is considered a bird of conservation concern.

We are losing nature. We seem to be doing the best we can to turn our country and our planet into Coruscant. That is the city planet – the ecumenopolis – of *Star Wars*. It may not be what we real human beings actually want, but it is what the people we put in charge seemed determined to give us.

We are now accustomed to the nibbling away of wild bits: a tree here, a brambly corner there, a pond that used lie just round the corner. In fact, just round the corner from where I live, there is a housing development called Broadland Meadows – in honour of what was destroyed.

It’s a bit like a campaign to wipe out religion bit by bit. One wayside shrine at a time, one chapel at a time, one small church that no one will miss. No one even notices, apart from a couple of local busybodies, and they are always written off as NIMBYs. I mean, how contemptible can you get – people trying to protect something they love?

Perhaps our nation and our planet has become the piecemeal victim of the Vogon Destructor Fleet in *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Perhaps the Vogons all sit down in committee to discuss the next target. Maybe a slightly bigger one this time. Well, how big?

Let’s pick one these, boys. Which one do you fancy? Yorkminster? St Paul’s Cathedral? King’s College Chapel?

You can’t. You daren’t. We’ll never get away with it!

Wrong! We’ve softened ‘em up with a million small acts of destruction: now we can go for the big one. And once that’s gone, the rest will be ours! They won’t protest now, they’re punch-drunk, out on their feet, reeling, groggy, all resistance is gone. This is the moment to go for the big one!

So now the Vogons have picked Minsmere. Minsmere is not just a nice nature reserve. It is a place where extinct birds came back and danced. That's not poetry that's scientific fact.

The avocet is as improbable a bird as you will ever see. It walks, or rather minces on exaggeratedly long legs, it is extravagantly black and white and it has a beak that turns the wrong way and tilts *upwards*.

Avocets went extinct as a breeding bird in Britain. Reason? We destroyed their habitat, draining coastal marshes for farming. But then World War Two happened, and we flooded the coast to make it harder for the Germans to invade: after all, they had a handy starting-off-point in occupied Holland. These flooded coasts kept the Germans out – and the avocets invaded instead. They did so at two places, at Havergate Island down the coast, and at Minsmere.

It was seen as a miracle. A glorious good news story. To get into Minsmere to see them in the 1950s was an extreme privilege. You needed special permission. There is in existence a memo to headquarters from the then warden, Bert Axell, complaining that the previous week there had been 36 visitors, instead of the usual 30: how could the birds be expected to stay and breed with such outrageous disturbance?

But the avocets stayed and prospered, and every year they arrive back in Minsmere early in the year and get down to the business of making more avocets. The return of an extinct bird was greeted with joyous incredulity, and the RSPB chose the bird as its logo. It was the most glorious symbol of hope: the war was over, civilisation was putting itself back together, even extinction itself could be made to work backwards – and Minsmere was at the heart of it all.

The marsh harrier came close to going one better than the avocet. It damn nearly went extinct in this country twice. The first time came through the great Victorian persecution of birds of prey, when anything with a hooked beak was poisoned, trapped or shot. They made a comeback during the First World War, when we other uses for men and ammunition than shooting birds of prey.

But we almost wiped them out for a second time during the 1950s and 1960s, when pesticides like DDT were used in reckless quantities. They got into the food-chain and made it impossible for birds of prey to breed. By 1971 we were down to a single nest of marsh harriers. That was at Minsmere.

From that incomparable centre of excellence the marsh harriers have spread out, as the pesticides became illegal. Marsh harriers are birds that *quarter*: they patrol reedbeds and wet marshland and their great skill is in flying slowly. With their wings held in a shallow Vee—a dihedral – they fly at speed that would stall most ordinary birds, and from there they drop like shuttlecocks onto the wet reedy larder beneath. If you want to inspect the perfection of these wings, all you have to do is pay a visit to Blythborough church, where a squadron of angels flies across the ceiling on wings borrowed from marsh harriers.

In spring males and females perform a series of aerobatics together in the above the reeds, a behavior known as the skydance. In its course a male will pass a food item – alas poor water-vole! – to the female: I have seen a male fully invert, talons to the sky, to pass a glorious gift to the female above him.

There is now an annual 400 marsh harrier nests in this country. So here is another story of comeback: fighting the tide of destruction: bringing hope into a troubled world -- and once again its heartland is Minsmere.

So let's talk about bitterns: a bird that skulks about in the reedbeds and makes a sound like a foghorn. It's called booming and male bitterns do it to attract a female and to claim a patch of reeds for their own. In 1997 there were just 11 booming males in the country. In 2011, there were 104.

The reason for their comeback was to do with the right way of managing the reedbeds. It's a complex business. In older and wilder times new reedbeds were always being formed, flooding out, drying up, and growing again. Now with land drained and coastlines managed, there is much less of the stuff. And it has to be managed: if it dries up, the bitterns can no longer find food there, and that's exactly what was happening all over the country.

A great deal of research on reedbed management was done at Minsmere in the early 1990s: for it's important to understand that Minsmere is as much a managed piece of land as a field of oilseed rape. Organisations involved in wildlife conservation were trying to farm for bitterns – and failing. But the work at Minsmere revealed a way of solving the problem. Reedbeds had to be cut -- trashed, basically – so that the young green wet growth strikes up again. This could be done on a rotational basis, so there was always fresh young reedbed available. The bitterns are booming: last

year 164 birds were recorded at 74 sites. And once again, Minsmere has been at the heart of this revival.

Even if this was just an ordinary nature reserve – even if this was just another patch of staggering natural beauty thronged with some of the most marvellous creatures that live on the earth – I would wish to see it looked after, taken care of, cherished, its future turned into a certainty.

But this is Minsmere, which is one of the greatest treasures we have in the entire country, for reasons of the great history I have just in part recounting, for reasons of its incomparable present, and because its future –if it has a future – will bring still more wonders.

Who cares? Well here's a plain fact. Birds are not just for birdwatchers. And anyway, even if not one ever went to Minsmere except birds, it would be essential to preserve it, for the sake of the birds themselves. Like the tree that falls in the deserted forest, birds require no human witness to validate their existence. You can argue that biodiversity – life's tendency to make lots and lots of different kinds of things – is the way on which life on earth is able to sustain itself.

Let me introduce to the rivet-popper hypothesis. An aeroplane is flying along, and it pops a rivet. So what? It keeps on flying. Another rivet goes. Another. And then another. So what? The plane is full of rivets. But if you keep on popping rivets, there will, sooner or later, come a time when the plane falls apart in the air. One rivet -- one species. The hypothesis may be wrong – and we are, right now, in the middle of a pretty searching testing of it. And as the great scientist and writer Edward O Wilson said: one planet, one experiment.

So a rich source of biodiversity should be encouraged, not just for its beauty, but for the part it pays in the future of our great grandchildren. There have been 342 species of bird recorded at Minsmere, with around 230 turning up every year, and around 100 species breed every year. More than 1,000 species of moth have been found here, and more than 1,500 species of fungi.

Minsmere also brings in humans. The days of 30 or ever 36 visitors a week have long gone: 120,000 make it to Minsmere every year. It's all part of the tourism industry of Suffolk which brings in £210 million a year.

Why do they come here? For the same reason that most of us live here: because it's fab, because it's wild, because it's not London, because it's rich in human and natural history, because it makes life worth living. Dave Drain, who used to keep the Eel's Foot pub near Minsmere, used to refer to weekenders and second-home-owners as "the flat batteries". They'd come into the pub and explain that they came to Suffolk, to Minsmere, to get their batteries recharged.

Suffolk has the great power of recharging batteries, because it's wild. You come here in spring – today, to take a random example – and the place is full of birdsong. You don't need to be able to tell a robin from a Cetti's warbler to revel in that. The place brings joy to its visitors and it does so because of its wildness and Minsmere is the hub of Suffolk's great web of wildness. People come here because it's good: if we make it bad they will stop coming and we who live here would also lose out, both in quality of life and the prosperity of the place where we live.

Meanwhile the Vogons keep telling us: never mind, you'll soon get used to it, after a while it won't matter at all. It's only going to be a bit damaged. Like being a little bit pregnant. Or like a balloon: we're only going to make a *small* hole in it. We're only going to fill the night with light, so good luck to all those moths, and the bats and the owls as well. And the noise. So they're planning to build a five metre high wall with wooden screening: and that, in itself, will be horrible, never mind all the din and billion candlepower behind it. It's just a nature reserve: plenty more where that came from. Except, of course there isn't, with 40 million disappearing birds and all that.

Well, maybe it won't be so bad. I mean, obviously it will be *worse*, but maybe not quite as bad as it could be. And EDF – I spent some time hanging out with them researching a piece on this issue – are sincere in their wish to do the right thing. I mean, they're sincere in wanting to do the right thing in a million small matters -- once one absolutely colossal *wrong* thing has been done. It's inevitable that Minsmere will be damaged: that no matter how good the mitigating and the compensating are, the place will not be the same: not as rich, not as wild, not as diverse.

I mean, this is Minsmere. This is the Taj Mahal, the Crown Jewels, the Mona Lisa. If there was even the slightest possibility that any human action could cause any one of these even temporary – let alone irreparable damage – we would do anything in our power to prevent it. Minsmere is no less a treasure than these.

Minsmere is a comparatively small place in one of the most nature-deprived countries in the world. We always like to pride ourselves on the thought that foreigners trash their countries while we English, we British have a deeper feelings and treasure our nature in a way that foreign people can't really understand, And alas this is all self-deluding, self-flattering nonsense: in Europe we are among the leaders for trashing. If you want to learn how to trash, come to us, and we'll show us our deep feeling for nature by calling what we've trashed Broadland Meadows.

Minsmere, as I have said before, is not just a nice place. In a sane and Vagon-free world the very suggestion that a development project could damage a place like Minsmere would be enough to bring it to halt at once: no, not even worth considering. You can't damage Minsmere: you can't even take the smallest risk of anything that even might just possibly have the tiniest detrimental effect on Minsmere.

Do they know *what* they are putting at risk? Perhaps not, because maybe you need a soul to understand it. And perhaps in 50 years' time, the people then entering the last third of their lives – Greta's generation – will read about Minsmere, and look at what's there instead, and say: “You mean they destroyed all that – for this?”

And those of literary bent, for there will still be some, will think of a few lines of Shakespeare, for Shakespeare, like Yorkminster and like Minsmere, is one of our great national treasures. They will think of the last act of *Othello*, and how the Moor, tried beyond endurance, compares himself to the Indian who threw away a pearl richer than all his tribe.

That's Minsmere. A pearl richer than all our tribe. Are we really going to throw it away?