



Fighting for nature
on a Lake District
hill farm

'Exquisite'
GUARDIAN

Wild Fell

'A thrilling journey'
ISABELLA TREE

LEE SCHOFIELD

‘A thrilling, inspiring journey into the restoration of our uplands. I found myself turning the pages with an inward leap of joy. Reasoned, intelligent, compassionate, well-informed, this is a story of hope and renewal for both nature and farming.’

Isabella Tree, author of *Wilding*

‘*Wild Fell* leaves you in no doubt that if we don’t protect our wild blooms, there won’t be any bugs and there won’t be any birds and, ultimately, any people.’

BBC Countryfile Magazine

‘Authentic, honest and clear-sighted – Lee Schofield offers a practical and hopeful example of how to return nature to all our landscapes using imagination, compromise, humility and sheer hard work. This is an important book and fully deserves its place alongside James Rebanks and other contemporary Lakeland classics.’

Patrick Barkham, author of *Wild Green Wonders*

‘Saving nature is a tough job. In *Wild Fell* we get to understand why people do it: real soul-deep passion.’

Simon Barnes, author of *A History of the World in 100 Animals*

‘Schofield is a delightfully companionable guide – evoking huge vistas alongside small, exquisite, multisensory details – you can almost inhale the scent of thyme and warm rock wafting from the pages.’

Guardian

‘A passionate, haunting yet optimistic account of the battle to heal a damaged landscape and restore nature to a corner of the Lake District.’

Dave Goulson, author of *Silent Earth*

‘A visionary, practical and lyrical book on restoring land, from one of the best in the game, on the front line of nature restoration.’

Benedict Macdonald, author of *Rebirding*

‘*Wild Fell* is a beautiful, powerful book that subtly navigates great and complex challenges.’

George Monbiot, author of *Regenesi*

‘In a country defined as the seventh most nature depleted on Earth, in a region plagued by flooding and climate-chaos, here comes Lee Schofield’s brilliant book full of positive action and hope for the future. *Wild Fell* throws down a gauntlet to us all to make the Lake District a national park that is genuinely worthy of the title.’

Mark Cocker, author of *Our Place*

‘A soaring elegy to nature, a book infused with a deep love of place, and a stirring call to restore wildlife to our landscapes, written with wit, verve and humility.’

Guy Shrubsole, author of *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*

‘As the competing needs of agriculture and conservation jostle for ascendancy, land management in Britain has reached a tipping point. Candid, raw and searingly honest, Lee Schofield offers a naturalist’s perspective of the challenges unfolding in the ancient yet ever-changing landscape of Haweswater and shares with us his gloriously vibrant vision for the future.’

Katharine Norbury, author of *The Fish Ladder*

‘Exhilarating . . . His writing, like the extinct, extant and envisioned landscapes he describes, is studded with moments of immense beauty – you can almost smell rock and moss and nectar, hear butterflies and grasshoppers flit and whirr, feel the shadow of a great wing passing between you and the sun.’

British Wildlife

Wild Fell

Fighting for Nature on a
Lake District Hill Farm

Lee Schofield



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Penguin paperback edition published 2023

Copyright © Lee Schofield 2022

Lee Schofield has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Map by Liane Payne
Illustrations by Bob Venables

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN
9781804990964

Typeset in Granjon LT Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



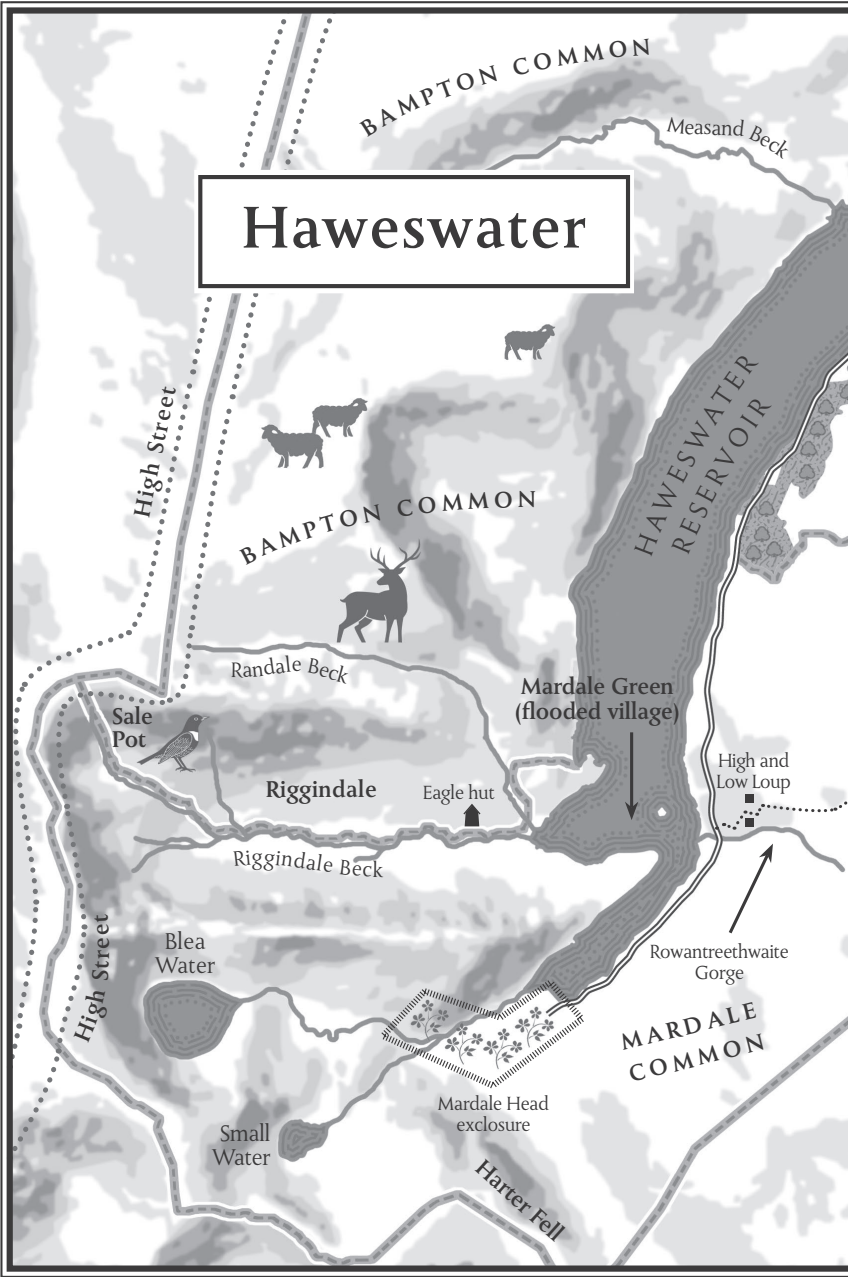
For Elliot and Aphra

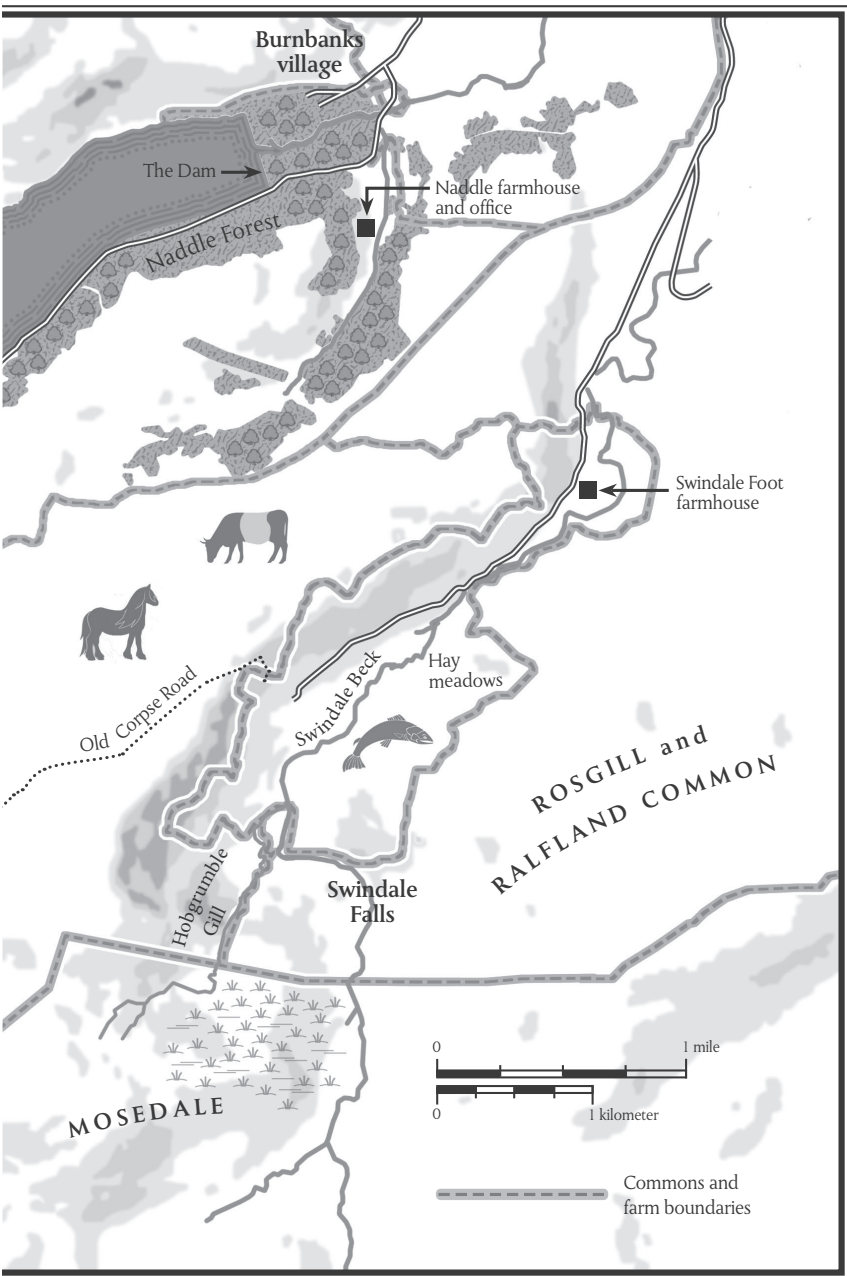
CONTENTS

Map	x–xi
Place Name Glossary	xiii
List of Illustrations	xvii
Introduction: The Willows	xix
Part 1: Imperfection	I
Chapter 1: The Eagle Hut	3
Chapter 2: Lonely Flowers.....	18
Chapter 3: Locking Horns	35
Chapter 4: Boom and Bust	54
Chapter 5: The Corpse Road	77
Chapter 6: Shadow Species	94
Part 2: Inspiration.....	121
Chapter 7: Across the Border	123
Chapter 8: Alone in Fidjadalen	137
Chapter 9: The Summer Farm.....	152
Chapter 10: The Alps.....	172
Chapter 11: Wild Lakeland	183
Chapter 12: Farmed Lakeland	201

Part 3: Intervention	213
Chapter 13: Flow	215
Chapter 14: Flowers	238
Chapter 15: Fells.....	255
Chapter 16: Fields	276
Chapter 17: Fragility.....	293
Chapter 18: Future.....	297
Afterword.....	305
Acknowledgements	307
Bibliography.....	311
Index	323

Wild Fell





PLACE NAME GLOSSARY

BEASTMAN'S CRAG (near Swindale): *The rocky height of the cattle-man* (Old English/Old Norse)

BECK: *Stream* (from Old Norse; *bekkr*)

BENTY HOWE (Bampton Common): *The hill where the bent-grass grows* (Old English/Old Norse)

BLÅFJELLENDEN (Fidjadalen, SW Norway): *The end of the blue mountain* (Norwegian)

BLEA WATER (Mardale Common): *The dark lake* (Old Norse/Modern English)

BRANT STREET (Mardale Common): *The steep path* (Old Norse/Old English)

BURN: *Large stream or small river* (Scotland)

CARRIFRAN GANS (Scottish Borders): *The fort of ravens* (Celtic)

CATSTYCAM (above Ullswater): *The steep path frequented by wild cats* (Middle English/Old Norse)

COCKLAKES (near Matterdale): *The place where the black cock play* (Old Norse)

COCKLE HILL (Bampton Common): *The hill where the black cock play* (Old Norse)

COLEDALE: *The valley of the charcoal burners* (Old Norse)

COMMON: *Unenclosed pasture for communal use* (Middle English)

CORRIE: *An amphitheatre-like valley formed by glacial erosion* (from Gaelic; *coire*)

CRAG: *Rocky height, major outcrop of wall or rock* (from Gaelic; *creag*)

DALE: *Valley* (from Old Norse; *dalr*)

FELL: *Hill, mountain, tract of high unenclosed land, high ground* (from Old Norse; *fell*, meaning a single hill and *fjall*, meaning mountainous country)

FJELL: *Mountain* (Norwegian)

FORCE: *Waterfall* (from Old Norse; *fors*)

GILL/GHYLL: *Ravine with stream* (from Old Norse; *gil*)

GLEDE HOWE (near Swindale): *Kite Hill* (Old Norse)

GOUTHER CRAG (Swindale): *The rocky height with an echo* (Old Norse)

GRAN PARADISO: *Great Paradise* (Italian)

HARE SHAW (Mardale Common): *Hare wood or copse* (Old Norse). This hill is no longer wooded.

HARTER FELL: *The mountain frequented by deer* (Old Norse)

HAWESWATER: *Hafr's Lake*. Hafr being a personal name (Old Norse)

HERON CRAG (Mardale Common, and many other Erne, Iron, Heron and Aaron crags elsewhere in the Lake District): *The rocky height frequented by white-tailed eagles* (from Old English; *erne*)

HIGH STREET: *The high paved road* (anglicized from the original Latin name, Via Alta)

HOBGRUMBLE GILL (Swindale): *The rumbling ravine haunted by a hobgoblin or bogle* (Old Norse)

KIDSTY PIKE (Bampton Common): *The peak at the top of the steep path where the young goats go* (Old Norse)

MARDALE: *The valley of the lake* (Old Norse)

MATTERDALE: *The valley where the bedstraw grows* (Old Norse)

MELL FELL (Matterdale): *Bare hill* (Cumbric)

MOSEDALE (above Swindale): *The valley with a bog* (Old Norse)

NADDLE: *The wedge-shaped valley* (Old Norse)

RIGGINDALE (Mardale and Bampton Common): *The valley below the ridge* (Old Norse)

RIVER LIZA (Ennerdale): *The bright, light river* (Old Norse)

ROSGILL (near Swindale): *The ravine where the horses graze* (Old Norse)

ROWANTREETHWAITE: *The clearing with the rowan tree* (Old Norse/Modern English)

SWINDALE: *The valley where the pigs graze* (Old Norse)

TARN: *Small mountain pool* (from Old Norse; *tjörn*)

ULTHWAITE RIGG (near Swindale): *The ridge above the wolf clearing* (Old Norse). There are many places in the Lake District that include *úlfr*, the Old Norse for wolf

WOOF CRAG (Mardale Common): *The rocky heights frequented by wolves* (Old English)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

TEA LEAF WILLOW	XX
GRASS OF PARNASSUS	4
PYRAMIDAL BUGLE	21
BUDDLEIA	49
BILBERRY	63
ROUND LEAVED SUNDEW	82
MOUNTAIN EVERLASTING	95
ALPINE SAW WORT	130
ALPINE CATCHFLY	148
TORMENTIL	153
MOUNTAIN AVENS	177
ASPEN	196
BOG MYRTLE	208
COMMON POLYPODY	219
GLOBEFLOWER	242
DEVIL'S BIT SCABIOUS	265

INTRODUCTION

The Willows

HARTER FELL:

The mountain frequented by deer
(Old Norse)

Three straggly trees huddle on the fissured face of Harter Fell, high in the Lake District's eastern corner. From thirty feet below, I can tell that they are willows, but I need to get closer to work out which species. With plenty of well-rooted birch and rowan to cling to, scrambling up the first part of the flower-hung crag is easy enough. The upper section, a few more degrees to the vertical, is a different matter. A loss of footing now would result in a slide, a plummet and a limb-breaking landing on the boulder scree below.

Few people set foot up here, leaving botanical treasures undiscovered in steep gullies and on brittle ledges. Water running over the crumbly, calcium-rich rocks forms patches of fertile rudimentary soil; great for flowers, not so great for climbing. Halfway up this slippery mess of a cliff, a solid-looking foot-long triangle of rock comes off in my hand, shattering on the ground below. I retreat with my pulse racing.

Working around the base of the crag, I find a gentler ascent

via a narrowing grassy corridor, hemmed in by rising cliffs. As usual, my progress is slow, distracted every few steps by the summer wildflowers. Stone bramble, alpine lady's-mantle, northern bedstraw, lesser meadow-rue and starry saxifrage enliven the rocks, the poetry in their names adding to the allure of their shapes and colours.

The willows come back into view with just a narrow sloping slab bridging the gap between us, which I inch across, crab-fashion. I feel as if I'm reaching hallowed ground. Growing beneath the unruly mesh of the willows' branches are the fleshy stems of roseroot, the smooth oval leaves of devil's-bit scabious, sturdy heather and vivid bilberry, a fragrant feast for any herbivore. That these plants are still here tells me that none have been brave or hungry enough to make the crossing. The soil is light and fluffy, with the rich mossy smell of an ancient oakwood. Any boot marks I leave will be quickly colonized, the plants erasing the evidence of my visit.

Their glossy green foliage tells me that these are tea-leaved willow, a species which grows in only a handful of places in the Lake District fells. No more than shoulder-height, their squat



and sprawling form keeps them stable on their wind-battered refuge. The promise of such rare and beautiful plants makes botanizing in these crags intensely addictive. There's always one more ledge to investigate, one more unexplored gully with secrets to uncover. I've never made it back to the car anything less than hopelessly late.

Fast growing and producing huge quantities of tiny air-borne seeds, willows are pioneers, quickly establishing in damp ground where the conditions are right. For thousands of years, willow bark has relieved human suffering – its soothing power led to the development of aspirin. Perhaps herbivores can detect this medicinal benefit, adding to willow's edible appeal. Smaller creatures are just as enticed; willows are second only to oaks in the number of insect species they support.

What I love most about willows is their regenerative ability. Stick a cut branch into damp soil during the winter months, and by spring, it will have sprouted leaves, on its way to becoming a whole new tree. Even a small cut branch kept inside on a tabletop can develop bright buds in spring, tiny green symbols of hope and renewal. There is no tree as hungry for life as a willow.

Like many other palatable species in this open landscape, these tea-leaved willows have become relics, fortunate to have found a place that gives security through inaccessibility. But their security doubles as a prison. In their isolated eyrie, their seeds can only blow into the grazed land below, where they have little hope of growing. I will return in winter, when the sap isn't flowing, to take cuttings and plant them somewhere they stand a better chance.

As happens so swiftly in the mountains, the weather is turning. Grey skies are bleeding into blue and a fine drizzle is making the slab even more precarious. Before daring the reverse scramble, I sit to absorb the view, wind swirling the rain into my face.

Before me is the four-mile crescent of Haweswater Reservoir, lying in the palm of Mardale, a name given by Vikings that translates as ‘the valley of the lake’. The word *dale* comes from the Old Norse word for valley: *dalr*. It’s one of many local geographic terms with Scandinavian roots, indelible reminders of this land’s long and ever-changing human history.

On a clear day, I’d be able to see further, across the green farmland of the Eden Valley to the Pennines, the long chain of hills that makes up the eastern horizon. Today the veil of rain that has drawn across Haweswater’s far end limits my view to the land into which I’ve been sinking roots for the best part of a decade. Sheltered from the wind by the crag wall beside me, I look out over a landscape littered with memories: the dinosaur-hunting expedition into the steep wooded gorge of Rowantreethwaite with my seven-year-old son; cooling swims below Swindale Falls following long days tramping the bog in Mosedale; carrying an injured lamb on my shoulders after gathering the flock from Riggindale; the new patch of bird’s-eye primrose I’d found in a flush on Mardale Common. Each experience a new intimacy.

Mardale is a valley where every lichen-encrusted rock and moss-clad tree resonates with stories. The remains of a flooded village lie beneath the reservoir’s dark surface. The first golden eagles to nest in England in a century did so on the crag where I’m perched. This is a place of ruins and wildness, of traditions ancient and modern. It is a working landscape that’s not working as well as it could be. It’s also a landscape of hope, where change is afoot. As the site manager for RSPB Haweswater, I’m one of many tending to the land as best I can to nurture its wildlife, to help it function better and undo some of the damage that we humans have inflicted on it over the centuries.

The hulking mass of Harter Fell, my mountain lookout,

brings the valley's only road to a dead end. Running from here, between drystone walls, it follows the curve of Haweswater's eastern shore as far as the old dam workers' village of Burnbanks, five miles north at the valley mouth. Working at this far southern end meant I revelled this morning in driving the reservoir's full length. The commute never gets old.

From where I sit, I can just pick out the ancient woodland of Naddle Forest clothing the eastern slopes above the water. In spring, the delicate flowers of wood anemones, bluebells, wood sorrel and yellow pimpernel stitch the forest floor. Above, the branches of oak and ash, downy birch and hazel, clothed in moss and ferns, are highways for the local red squirrels. The terrain there is so steep and the plant life so riotous that the forest receives few human visitors. I've spent happy days exploring those woods, navigating steep ground in search of parasitic bird's-nest orchids or tree lungwort lichen, listening out for wood warblers or redstarts, each new species record contributing a little more to the detailed picture of this place and its wild inhabitants.

Even though the M6 motorway is only seven miles away, Naddle Forest can feel like an escape into wilderness, a total immersion in mossy chaos. Yet this forest is a relic too. Big enough to lose yourself in, perhaps, but a fragment of a much larger woodland that historically extended further up the now treeless hills and down below the waterline.

Wallow Crag erupts from Naddle Forest's canopy, and from its top one of the valley's starkest contrasts is revealed. For while the eastern side is rich with woodland, the fells that rise to the west, half a mile across Haweswater's wind-chopped water, are bald but for a scatter of conifer blocks. The open ground is stripped, its rocky skeleton breaking through a skin of yellow, green and brown.

My Harter Fell willows are the tattered survivors of a habitat that has effectively vanished from the Lake District. Before the epoch of intensive grazing, montane scrub formed extensive patches of willows and wildflowers just below the windswept fell tops. I've spent time in montane scrub in Norway where it covers hundreds of square miles. With an understorey of many of the same bulky and nectar-rich flowers that grow on the crags of Harter Fell, the habitat supports a spectacular array of wildlife, from bluethroats and ring ouzels to black grouse and golden eagles. Our hills, by comparison, are just a great blank space, haunted by the shadows of vanished creatures.

This is the landscape my colleagues and I have been charged with looking after, a landscape of shattered fragments, longing to be put back together. Aldo Leopold, one of the godfathers of modern nature conservation, said, 'To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.' The Harter Fell willows are one such cog.

PART I

Imperfection

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

William Wordsworth, from
'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from
Recollections of Early Childhood', 1804

CHAPTER I

The Eagle Hut

RIGGINDALE:

The valley below the ridge

(Old Norse)

Tonight, I sleep with the ghosts of eagles. It's late April and I'm due at the head of Riggindale before sunrise tomorrow to find out if ring ouzels are nesting in the corrie of Sale Pot this year. Until then, the Eagle Hut, a small wooden shed nestled in the crook of a lichen-spattered stone wall, is my home for the night. It's not much to look at. Held down by steel cables, the Eagle Hut's single-pitch roof and scarred timber sides bear witness to decades of pummelling by an upland climate. Its setting, though, is a genuine feast for the eyes.

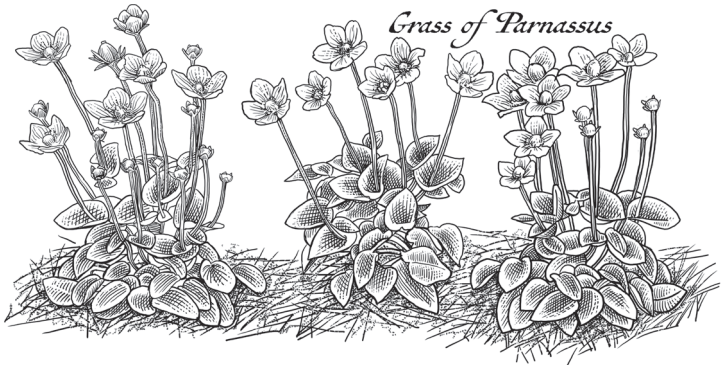
Riggindale is like a diagram in a geology textbook, its U-shaped glacial trough running perfectly west to east and its steep back wall topped by a pencil-sharp skyline. It is a valley of two halves, with sheer cliffs and steep ravines on its southern side punctuated by twisted birch and rowan trees. The north side is bald rock, grass and bracken, its gentler gradient giving easy access to sheep and deer. The Eagle Hut sits near the valley's mouth, beside Riggindale Beck which snakes its

way down towards Haweswater's western shore in extravagant, boulder-strewn curves.

I scramble down behind the hut to reach a small pool in the beck to fill a bottle to cook my dinner. Crossing a flush, where water seeps over the ground, I notice red-tentacled sundews and the lime-green stars of butterwort amid the triangular stems of sedges and a lush moss carpet. Where the flush meets the beck, I find rosettes of the heart-shaped leaves of grass-of-Parnassus. In the coming weeks, long graceful stems will rise from these rosettes, bearing clusters of pure white flowers, delicate tracery on each of their five perfect petals. This is a plant that belongs here, so much so that it has been adopted as Cumbria's county flower.

I can't claim such a long connection. I was born in Scotland, but raised in deepest Devon, in a mud and straw house folded into the landscape by gently rolling hills and towering hedges. My brother and I enjoyed a free-range childhood that feels more like make-believe the further I get from it. We ran wild in the self-contained world between the two ends of our winding lane.

Our parents worked hard running a small business that



made and distributed West Country produce to London, which always provided work for the two of us. When we weren't on scotch-egg duties (two pence per peeled egg) the primrose and fern-filled hedges, fields and lanes were our domain, supplying blackberries in the summer, hazelnuts in the autumn and hiding places all year round.

Spending my formative years surrounded by nature meant that I never paid it much attention; it was just there. I assumed that everyone had the chance to pick tiny wild strawberries as they walked home from the school bus, that everyone made dens in thickets and caught grass snakes and slow worms. It was only moving away that made me realize how lucky I'd been.



As I walk back over to the Eagle Hut in the fading light, my shadow lengthening, I remind myself how fortunate I am to be able to call this work. It is not a privilege I wear lightly, and every day I'm striving to be worthy of this place and the stewardship role I've been entrusted with.

The sun is sinking over High Street, the long ridge at the far western end of the valley. Its shadow comes galloping towards me, stripping away the day's warmth as it passes. I need to eat and sleep. Tomorrow starts early. As I unpack my cooking things, I find a faded RSPB membership leaflet under the bench that will be my bed for the night, harking back to the days when this shed was more than just a dusty place to sleep. Over the years, thousands of people made pilgrimages to this valley, for it was here, among Riggindale's remnant woodland, screes, crags and flushes, that England's only golden eagles made their home for nearly five decades.

Eradicated in England by the Victorians, golden eagles

began to show up again in the Lake District soon after it became a national park in 1951. A handful of birds made nesting attempts in remote locations, but throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s their nests were left unfinished and eggs weren't laid. It turned out that sheep dips, used to protect against insect pests, were scuppering the eagles' breeding success. Sheep would often die whilst grazing out in the fells, and their carcasses made up the bulk of the Haweswater eagles' diet. And so the noxious organochlorine chemicals in the dips made their way into the eagles' bodies, weakening would-be mothers and thinning the shells of their eggs. When organochlorine dips were finally banned, the birds recovered, and in 1969 a pair laid the first golden eagle eggs England had seen in 170 years on the steep north face of Harter Fell, a stone's throw from where I had found the tea-leaved willows.

Things didn't go well that first year. The Mardale Head car park, just below Harter Fell and its pioneering nest, generated more disturbance than the eagles could bear and two precious eggs were abandoned. Riggindale, a mile around Haweswater's south-west shore, proved more tranquil, and it was here that the birds were to have more success, raising sixteen chicks between 1970 and 1996. Not only was Riggindale quieter but it also happened to have an 'Eagle Crag' near the valley mouth, just a few hundred metres from the hut, named centuries ago to mark a historic nest site. The eagles' instincts had drawn them to a place that had been used by their kind since time immemorial.

The RSPB arrived soon after the eagles settled. Establishing an office in one of the wooden houses at Burnbanks at the northern end of Haweswater, my predecessors worked tirelessly during the decades the eagles spent in Riggindale to ensure that the birds had the best possible chance of rearing their young in peace. For a short time, there was even a second

nest, over in the western Lake District. Without the protection afforded by the RSPB, this territory didn't fare so well and was soon abandoned, leaving the Riggindale eagles the gloomy accolade of being the last of their species in England.

The Eagle Hut's initial use was as a base from which to monitor the nest and guard against thieves intent on stealing the birds' eggs, a real danger in those days. Later, it became the Eagle Viewpoint, where a committed band of wardens and volunteers armed with telescopes helped visitors to see these living embodiments of wildness in their only English outpost.

Golden eagles are long-lived birds, and just three overlapping generations made up the lonely lineage at Haweswater. After the male of the original pair died in 1976, he was replaced by a second male who went on to become Britain's oldest recorded golden eagle, living for thirty-two years. The original female passed away in 1981 and was replaced by another newcomer, who took up with the second male. The most tragic member of this little group was the third and final male, who arrived in the early 2000s. He spent the first couple of years paired with the second female, but she was now so elderly that she failed to produce any eggs. After she died in 2004, he was left in the valley by himself. Every spring he would perform his tumbling, undulating display flight, in the hope of attracting a new mate, but by this time the closest golden eagle population in Southern Scotland had dwindled, and there were simply not enough birds in the vicinity. From time to time, rumours of other golden eagles in the Lake District would circulate, but England's last golden eagle never succeeded in pulling in a mate. With every year that passed, his breeding display flights seemed less and less enthusiastic, and eventually in 2015 he vanished, having spent over a decade alone; a potent symbol of wildness bleeding out of the landscape.

I started at Haweswater in 2013, just before this nadir. For my first couple of years, we continued to operate the Eagle Viewpoint during weekends in the spring and summer. It was always an incredible thrill to catch sight of our golden eagle, even if distantly. There is no more spectacular bird. Even though they aren't now the UK's largest bird of prey, having been beaten to the top spot by reintroduced white-tailed eagles, their sheer power and grace makes them incomparable. With two-metre wingspans, and weighing more than a newborn human, they can kill prey as large as young red deer – their tendency to take lambs and game birds is why they've had such a history of persecution. Yet for all the excitement of seeing our eagle, working at the Viewpoint was always tinged with sadness; we knew what was coming.

He was about twenty years old when he disappeared, a typical lifespan for wild eagles. That winter there had been terrible storms, creating intolerable conditions for a bird already past his prime. Despite his keen eyesight, he would have struggled to pick out prey through the endless rain, the wind constantly blowing him off target. He most likely died of starvation, tumbling from his craggy perch to be ingloriously pulled apart by foxes and ravens.

The same angry weather in the winter of his demise ripped off the Eagle Hut's roof. The storms unleashed floods, forcing hundreds of people from their homes across the county. Stefan, a Polish war hero who settled in the area and dedicated over twenty years of his life to protecting the eagles in the 1980s and 1990s, passed away in his sleep a few days after the last eagle sighting. Something more than the death of a bird had occurred; a vital thread had unravelled.

That the whole of England is incapable of supporting a single pair of golden eagles, where historically there had been

hundreds, should be a source of national shame. I felt some of this shame personally – after all, England’s last eagle had disappeared on my watch. Although the rational part of my brain knew it was inevitable, this knowledge came at a time when my job was already taking a heavy toll.

We patched the Eagle Hut up, put its roof back on, perhaps unable to accept that the reign of the Riggindale eagles was over, or as a mark of our belief that they would return. It may just be a wooden shed, but as I settle down to sleep in its creaking confines, the Eagle Hut’s history and significance are palpable, as is Riggindale’s sense of vacancy. Buzzards and ravens, birds that had been chased out by the eagles, soon moved back into the valley. Wonderful though these species are, they are poor replacements for their absent king.

In the night, I’m woken from a dream of wind-ruffled feathers by a group of red deer. The wind has picked up and they have come down the valley from the higher fells above to seek shelter behind the walls. I drift back off to the sound of their breathing and shuffling outside. My alarm goes off at 4 a.m. There is no sign of the deer by the time I emerge. I head west, following the beck upstream as it gurgles in the darkness.



Ring ouzels are the mountain-dwelling, white-collared relatives of blackbirds. Most spend the winter months in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, returning to upland areas in Northern Europe to breed. Like a depressingly long list of other birds, ring ouzels are on the red list of species of conservation concern, their numbers having declined sharply over recent decades. Living in such steep and remote terrain, they are more often heard than seen, and with their tendency to stop singing

at sunrise, finding them requires an early start. Sleeping in the Eagle Hut has shortened my nocturnal hike.

The location for my survey this morning is a small hanging valley, or corrie, called Sale Pot, at Riggindale's north-western corner. Riggindale Beck flows out of Sale Pot, so keeping it to my left and working upstream makes the corrie easy enough to find, even in the pre-dawn darkness. It's a gentle climb for the first mile or so, but as I reach the short, steeper section up over the corrie's lip, the sky starts to lighten so I pick up the pace.

It's curious, Sale Pot. As I enter it, I always expect to be greeted by a tarn, a small mountain lake, like the ones which occupy two similar corries just over the ridge to the south. There's no doubt that there used to be water here; Sale Pot's name means 'willow pool'. But there's no tarn now, just a tell-tale network of drains dug by people long dead to gain access to deposits of peat which they could cut for fuel. Other than a single, stunted bush growing up on a high ledge, there aren't any willows here either.

No matter how much Sale Pot might have changed, the ring ouzels seem to like it. As soon as I enter its glacially carved amphitheatre, I can hear the distinctive double whistle of the male ouzel echoing around its steep sides. I take a seat on a flat rock, hoping that the gathering light will allow me a glimpse of the singer. As I scan with my binoculars, there's movement on the opposite side, above where the corrie's tarn must once have been. I see a badger lumber along a sheep trod and disappear into its sett in the boulder scree. I'm 550 metres above sea level, in a virtually treeless landscape. Not where I'd have expected to see a badger. Nature is full of surprises.

The ring ouzel keeps singing until the sun comes up over the ridge behind me, and right on schedule he shuts up. Shortly

after, both he and his mate appear, hunting for worms and grubs in the short grass at the base of the corrie wall. They are seriously smart-looking birds. Against his dark feathers, the male's crisp white markings are like an Incan necklace. The female is marked in the same way, but muted, as if she's spent too much time in the mountain rain.

Although not a mainstay, ring ouzels are one of many species that would have fallen prey to Riggindale's eagles. In more pristine upland landscapes red and black grouse, their relative the ptarmigan and mountain hares make up the bulk of a golden eagle's diet. Of those, only red grouse can be found in the Lakes, and even they are few and far between. But golden eagles are a highly adaptable species and will scavenge if wild prey isn't readily available. At Haweswater, the eagles survived predominantly on the carrion of both sheep and deer. They'd also hunt rabbits, red grouse and the occasional crow, ring ouzel, badger, fox or any other creature unwise enough to let its guard down.

The rise and fall of the Riggindale eagles feeds Haweswater's wild and rugged aura. It isn't wild, though. Perhaps more so than anywhere else in the Lake District, this is a landscape that has been dramatically moulded by human hands.



Leaving the ouzels, I follow the beck back down towards the hut to pack up. Other than the remains of an old stone barn, the hut is the only building I can see. A century ago, there would have been a church with a sturdy square tower in my line of sight, and cottages and several small clusters of farm buildings surrounded by fertile farmland.

For centuries, Mardale and its two small hamlets, Mardale

Green and Measand, had been on an important trade route connecting the town of Penrith to the north with Kendal and Ambleside to the south, thanks to two mountain passes over which livestock and goods flowed. Mardale Green's church, parsonage and the small but comfortable Dun Bull Inn spoke of the area's prosperity, but as trains and cars replaced feet and ponies the valley became a tranquil backwater. Yet as Mardale's community continued the quiet pastoral way of life that had sustained them for generations, distant powers were making designs on their valley.

Some 75 miles south of Mardale as the eagle flies, the burgeoning urban population of Manchester and its booming industries had a thirst for water that couldn't be satisfied by local rainfall. So, in 1919 an Act of Parliament was passed that enabled the Manchester Water Corporation to acquire 10,000 hectares of land in and around Mardale, to construct a dam and create a reservoir.

Before the dam, the original Haweswater Lake was smaller, shallower and partially divided by a spit of land into two connected water bodies, which the old maps name as High Water and Low Water. Haweswater Beck flowed out of Low Water at its eastern end, where stepping stones allowed people to cross its great width. By 1935 the 470-metre-wide, 36-metre-high concrete bulk of the dam across the valley was complete, the flow in the beck was arrested and the water started to rise. The valley floor, its farms, fields and hamlets were slowly lost to the rising water, which today sits 29 metres above its original level. The new reservoir kept the name Haweswater, given to the lake by people who could never have imagined its modern incarnation.

The desecration of Mardale and the displacement of its forty residents generated huge controversy and opposition; it