

# Urban nature, urban hope

Why does the urban environment matter to nature?  
**Andy Lester**, A Rocha UK Head of Conservation, explains.

When someone mentions the word 'urban', what immediately springs to mind? For me, it's the memory of looking for a rare bird called a black redstart in and around central Birmingham's Gas Street Basin in the 1980s. At the time, it was a run-down inner-city area, with high unemployment, knife crime and drug dealing – yet its random wildflower patches and discarded piles of bricks were also home to the black redstarts. Today, Gas Street has been transformed and crime has gone down. But the black redstart has also disappeared.

So, does urban re-development and expansion inevitably mean losing nature? Or could Britain's towns and cities contribute to restoring nature?

## The way we live now

According to the 2011 UK National Ecosystem Assessment, an urban area is 'a human settlement with a high population... and all the features of a built environment such as infrastructure'. In other words, all our towns and cities.

Conservationists have long bemoaned our rapidly growing urban landscape and the loss of our countryside. While still only 8% of the total UK land area (21 million hectares) is classed as urban,<sup>1</sup> houses, shopping centres, warehouses and roads are eating away at agricultural and other land, suburbanising the 'countryside'.

At the same time, 83.4% of the UK population now lives in an urban area<sup>2</sup> – a massive change in the last 50 years. No wonder, then, that there is a widespread feeling that the country is disappearing under concrete and tarmac, and the public is losing contact with nature.

“ Just over half the land *within* our towns and cities is green space. ”

## Focus on urban

As readers will know, UK nature is in trouble. It's easy to assume that the answer lies purely in preserving our countryside (and better management of rural land for nature is critical), but urban areas offer huge scope for action too.

In 2012, researchers found that 54% of the land *within* our towns and cities is green space: parks, allotments, sports pitches and so on.<sup>3</sup> There are 530,000 hectares of residential gardens in the UK – an area almost three and a half times the size of Greater London. There are thousands of urban churchyards. Many of our declining species, from swifts and martins, hedgehogs and slow worms, to butterflies and bees, would be helped if we designed and managed our *urban* green spaces and buildings with wildlife in mind.

It's not just nature that needs our urban spaces to be more nature-friendly. There are strong links between *human* mental and physical well-being and contact with nature. GPs have now started prescribing time in nature as a cheap and effective remedy for anxiety and stress: A Rocha UK's own Wolf Fields reserve in west London has just been designated as an approved site!

## Valuing nature

Now, too, research is identifying the economic value of urban nature. Economics and nature are often uncomfortable bed-fellows. It's impossible to put a meaningful price on irreplaceable nature and human well-being; these things have intrinsic value. Indeed, the Bible teaches us that all species have value, because they are God's creatures.



Black-headed gull (adult winter plumage) in St James's Park, London. © Diliff / CC by SA 3.0



A bonus for nature: uncult and sown verges. © David Morgan

Even so, calculations of the economic value of the 'services' that urban nature provides to humans is likely to become increasingly important in the decisions of urban planners, public health and climate policy makers. For example, urban woodland areas in the UK are estimated to 'sequester' (remove from the atmosphere) 537,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually, with an estimated value of at least £32.8 million in carbon savings on international carbon markets. Urban hedges, mature verges and wild corners have been calculated to trap 31.7 kilotonnes of particulates and other pollutants (such as sulphur dioxide and ozone), saving the NHS about £211 million a year in additional health costs from illnesses related to pollution. In short, there is also a very strong financial case for increasing the diversity and quality of living habitats in our towns and cities because it reduces public expenditure on a range of public ills.

## Signs of hope

The power is in our hands to transform our urban areas for the benefit of wildlife and people. Around the country, there are encouraging examples: sedum roofs, green walls, urban beekeeping, tree-planting initiatives, 'wilding' roadside verges, to name but a few.

In Solihull (West Midlands), a joint project is underway between Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Solihull Council and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society to create a 90-hectare green corridor for hedgehogs across the borough. In East Lothian, a new Urban Nature Retreat programme has been set up to reconnect people, especially from under-privileged areas, to animals, birds, insects and plants. Sheffield is undertaking a £1.3 million initiative between the city council, three

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Office of National Statistics (July 2018): UK Natural Capital: Ecosystem Accounts for Urban Areas.

<sup>2</sup>data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=GB

<sup>3</sup>bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18623096

### References

warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\_fac/iatl/reinvention/archive/bcur2012specialissue/brightman/

Hayhoe, DB et al., *State of Nature 2016*

universities and the Wildlife Trusts to look at the impacts on health and well-being of the creation of urban nature space.

And of course, A Rocha UK is working at this too – with our own nature reserve in the heart of the London Borough of Ealing, and our partner project in Dronfield in Derbyshire (see page 9).

## Play your part

So, what can you and your church do to help urban nature?

- Get in touch with A Rocha UK who can tell you about some of the initiatives at our own and partner projects, and in some of our urban Eco Churches.
- Contact your local Wildlife Trust to find out how you can engage with urban conservation work in your local area. Find out about local urban nature campaigns (from clean air appeals to plastic-free projects) and join in!
- Buy a bat, swift or martin box for your house; dig a pond; plant specific native plants and trees to attract pollinating insects... And keep an area messy: mown lawns and clipped hedges are rarely good for nature.

Urban areas offer surprising opportunities to reverse declines in some species and habitats, and improve human well-being at the same time. Done by Christians and churches in the name of our loving, creator God, urban nature conservation is a *missional* opportunity too. If we act together for nature in our towns and cities, it could have a transformative effect, bringing hope for the future – and for amazing species like the black redstart.

## Reimagining urban

See overleaf for a vision of what urban nature could be.