



Free Public Lecture Series, Spring 2012

‘URBAN ECOLOGY’

Birkbeck Institute of Environment, University of London
in conjunction with the
Ecology and Conservation Studies Society and the Linnean Society of London

Most people in the world now live in urban areas, and the proportion is still growing, so urban ecology affects the welfare and amenities of an increasing number of people. Wildlife habitats in urban areas have been transformed: there is a great deal of disturbance, hard surfaces and private gardens predominate, and there are numerous wastelands. There are many losses and gains from built development. City climates are warmer and drier than those of the nearby countryside. Urban areas often provide the first foothold of invading exotic species. The conservation of urban wildlife needs to take these factors into account and also the heavy pressures on urban wildlife from competing uses for land. After over 30 years of research and practice, urban ecology has probably come of age in the UK. These lectures will highlight what is distinctive about urban ecology and what we can learn from this.

Join the debate. All welcome. Free admission. Booking is not necessary.

The lectures will be held in Lecture Theatre B33 at Birkbeck College, University of London, Torrington Square, London, WC1E 7HX. All lectures are from 6.30pm to 8.30 pm on the following Fridays. Doors open at 6.00pm.

For enquiries, e-mail Dave Dawson: ecssoc@gmail.com (tel: 020 8946 4476)

3 February ‘Nature in Towns and Cities’

Prof. David Goode, Visiting Professor at University College London

10 February ‘Wild London?’

Dr Ken Thompson, Senior Research Fellow at Sheffield University

17 February ‘Urban flora’

Dr Mark Spencer, Curator of the British and Irish Herbarium, Natural History Museum

24 February ‘Losses to garden habitats and their birds’

Chloë Smith, Greenspace Information for Greater London & Dave Dawson, retired applied ecologist

2 March No Lecture

9 March ‘What a waste — what is the biodiversity value of urban brownfields?’

Richard Jones, fellow of the Royal Entomological Society and of the Linnean Society, and a past president of the British Entomological and Natural History Society

16 March ‘Environmentally illiterate? Societal disconnection from nature in the city’

Mathew Frith, Deputy Chief Executive of London Wildlife Trust

The Ecology and Conservation Studies Society and the Linnean Society of London the welcome new members. Society details and application forms will be available at the door, and are on websites at:

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/environment/prospective/ecss>

<http://www.linnean.org>

‘URBAN ECOLOGY’

Notes on the Contributors and their Lectures

3 February ‘Nature in Towns and Cities’

Prof. David Goode has been one of the leading figures in urban ecology and conservation since 1982 when he was Senior Ecologist at the Greater London Council. Subsequently he was Director of the London Ecology Unit and Head of Environment at the Greater London Authority. He has been directly involved in developing the theory and practice of urban nature conservation, both as a professional ecologist and an enthusiastic naturalist. He published *Wild in London* in 1986 and co-edited the *Routledge Handbook of Urban Ecology*, published last year. He is currently writing a *New Naturalist* on Nature in Towns and Cities. Since 1992 he has been a Visiting Professor at University College London.

The talk will explore urban wildlife, providing a broad picture of the range of habitats, and some of the key species, that characterise British towns and cities. It will also attempt to unravel some of the underlying processes involved, and how they might influence the kind of nature that can exist within the urban environment. The talk is illustrated with numerous examples to demonstrate how opportunities, constraints and the overwhelming influence of change, all play a part in promoting the remarkable variety that is urban ecology.

10 February ‘Wild London?’

Dr Ken Thompson is a Senior Research Fellow at Sheffield University, where he has been since 1990, and has broad research interests across almost the whole of plant ecology. He is increasingly interested in the science of gardening and was one of the leaders of the ‘Biodiversity in Urban Gardens in Sheffield (BUGS)’ project. He has published four gardening books: ‘An Ear to the Ground’ (Eden Project Books, 2003), ‘No Nettles Required’ (Eden Project Books, 2006), ‘Compost’ (Dorling Kindersley, 2007) and ‘The Book of Weeds’ (Dorling Kindersley 2009). In 2010 he published a popular book on biodiversity: ‘Do We Need Pandas?’ (Green Books).

Maybe you don’t think London and other cities are particularly wild? But how wild is the countryside, and what do we mean by ‘wild’ anyway? This lecture will try to persuade you that, if we adopt the right viewpoint, the bits of countryside that seem to be the most ‘wild’ are not really very wild at all. Moreover, from the perspective of the animals that live there, urban gardens and brownfields are no less wild than the Serengeti, just on a slightly smaller scale. This revisionist view of the natural world, in which man and his works are part of – rather than somehow ‘outside’ – nature, has some interesting implications for what we choose to conserve, and how we conserve it.

17 February ‘Loving the alien’

Dr Mark Spencer is Curator of the British and Irish Herbarium at the Natural History Museum, London. His life-long passion for plants was fuelled by a childhood spent wandering the Lizard peninsula, Cornwall and the Northamptonshire countryside. His botanical interests are wide-ranging but currently are particularly focused on the historic and non-native floras of London and the Isles of Scilly. He is Vice-county recorder for Middlesex for the Botanical Society of the British Isles, and the Vascular Plant Recorder for the London Natural History Society.

Non-native plants in London's habitats are often seen as a problematic aspect of our biodiversity; opinion on their value varies considerably and their detractors and defenders can be equally vociferous. Overall, we remain relatively ignorant about how to document plants in the urban environment; methodologies are largely borrowed from extant approaches that have been developed for non-urban natural and semi-natural habitats. Environmental change is driving significant change in urban plant communities, understanding these changes is of importance to London's environment as well as the wider British landscape. This talk will aim to illustrate some of these issues drawing upon information gathered as part of the London Natural history Society's Flora of London project.

24 February 'Losses to garden habitats and their birds'

Chloë Smith currently works with biodiversity information at Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL). She moved to London in 2008, following research into public engagement with wildlife gardening at Leeds University, to work on a new research project exploring London's garden make-up. This project, a partnership between Greater London Authority, GiGL and London Wildlife Trust, culminated with the publication of *London: Garden City?* last summer. Though London-based, the study has had international interest, influencing urban green space discussions as far afield as Australia.

Dave Dawson is a retired urban ecologist, having worked on ecology and nature conservation in London for 23 years. There, he worked on the programme for London Boroughs' urban nature conservation that culminated in the Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy. In retirement, he's studying bird populations in London suburbia, hoping that their fine-scale distribution may hold clues to the reasons for the big changes we have seen over the last 20 years.

In the UK, large cities have an urban core, but mainly are comprised of suburbia. It's these private gardens that support most "urban" wildlife. Chloë will describe the results of a detailed study of the composition of London's gardens and of recent changes there. Losses from built development pale into insignificance in comparison with the cumulative impact of what individual landowners are doing, without needing planning permission. Dave Dawson will describe birdlife in suburbia. Most species are reluctant urban dwellers, preferring those greener places where large gardens permit the development of rich vegetation. Although only a few species prefer the greyer areas of dense housing, they are abundant there, so these grey areas have many feral pigeons and carrion crows, and once also supported swifts, starlings and house sparrows in abundance.

9 March 'What a waste — what is the biodiversity value of urban brownfields?'

Richard Jones is a fellow of the Royal Entomological Society and of the Linnean Society, and a past president of the British Entomological and Natural History Society. He writes about insects for magazines like BBC Wildlife and Gardeners' World, and is a regular panellist on BBC Radio 4's environmental series Home Planet. He is author of *Extreme Insects* (HarperCollins), *Mosquito* (Reaktion) and *The Little Book of Nits* (Bloomsbury). As well as writing about insects, he also carries out environmental surveys, particularly on London brownfield sites.

Brownfields have an image problem. Brown is not a cool colour; it is the colour of excrement, the colour of dirt. Derided as economically useless 'wastelands', brownfields are often portrayed as being little more than bulldozed heaps of rubble, twisted metal and fly-tipped rubbish. But brownfields are more floristically diverse than chalk downland, and home to more red-data-book and nationally scarce insects than ancient woodlands. In much of London and the Thames Gateway, brownfield sites are the most important wildlife sites on offer, but their wildlife worth is often not appreciated until the developers' bulldozers move in. By which time it is too late.

16 March 'Environmentally illiterate? Societal disconnection from nature in the city'

Mathew Frith is the Deputy Chief Executive of London Wildlife Trust. He has been working in urban ecology for over 20 years, with experience of land management, nature conservation policy and advocacy in his work with London Ecology Unit, English Nature and the Trust. Recently he worked for Peabody, managing their green spaces and co-founding *Neighbourhoods Green*, a programme to raise the quality of the open spaces owned and managed by social landlords. He is also a Design Council CABE Adviser and Green Flag Award judge. His favourite bird is the magpie.

Cities are for people not for nature, or so we are often told. There is an increasing body of evidence showing people's increasing disconnection from the natural world – not only a physical distance, but a metaphorical and psychological distance too – with potentially damaging impacts. Our urban communities are ever more diverse, more globally aware, and ever-better electronically connected. And an increasingly technological society, that seeks to protect us from the outside world, but emulate the more attractive parts of it virtually in a more pronounced and fantastical way, has consequences in terms of the values we place on nature, and how we choose to relate to it. What are the social and political aspects we need to consider in order to protect, conserve and promote the nature of our towns and cities in the future?

The Ecology and Conservation Studies Society aims to foster interest in conservation based on sound ecological principles by arranging lecture courses, field visits and meetings, and by keeping its members up to date on literature, new concepts, research and practical field studies techniques. Membership is open to all who have relevant experience or interests. Non-members are most welcome at these lecture series.

Web site : <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/environment/prospective/ecss>

The Linnean Society of London is the world's oldest active biological society. Founded in 1788, the Society takes its name from the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), whose collections have been in its keeping since 1829. The Society promotes the study of all aspects of the biological sciences, with particular emphasis on evolution, taxonomy, biodiversity and sustainability. It encourages and communicates scientific advances through its three world-class journals, special publications, meetings and website. The Society also reaches out to future biologists through schools and educational programmes.

Web site : <http://www.linnean.org>

The ECSS Autumn 2012 Free Public Lecture Series will be held on six consecutive Friday evenings from mid October to mid November 2012.

Watch our website; - details will be posted by August 2012.

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/environment/prospective/ecss>