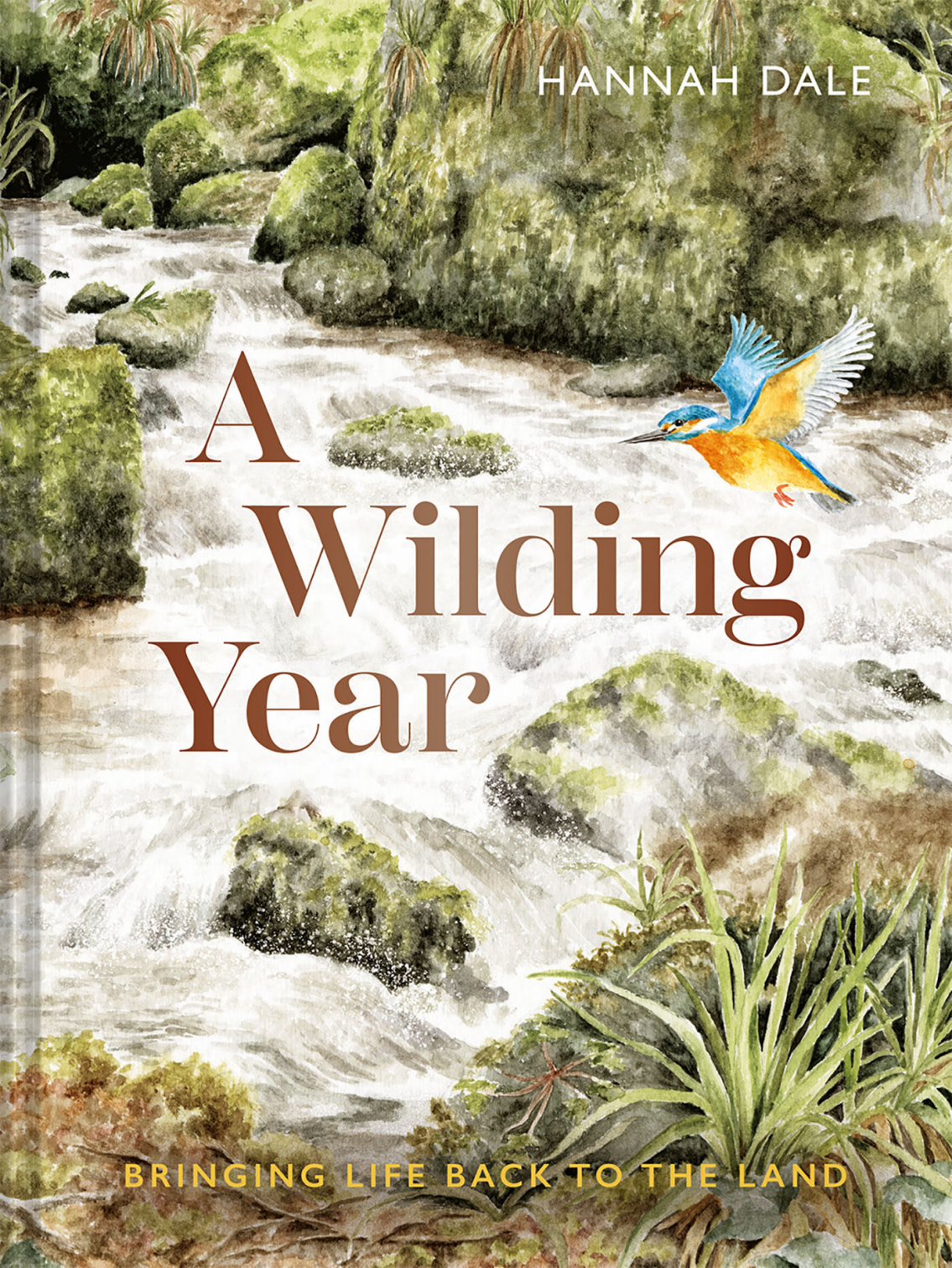
HANNAH DALE



A Wilding Year

BRINGING LIFE BACK TO THE LAND

August

The little grebe chicks have finally hatched. Five downy balls of black fluff with narrow stripes streaking down their heads like seams of gold. It's actually quite difficult to ascertain how many chicks there are. They shelter snugly under the wings of their parents, and every so often another seems to materialize from what looks like an impossibly small space, as though plucked from Mary Poppins' bag. They are understandably very nervous – it's unlikely that all five chicks will fledge – and I try to make myself inconspicuous as far away as I can get while keeping them in view with the binoculars. I end up settling on the mound at the edge of the ponds.

I am surrounded by the chirping voices of crickets and grasshoppers, singing at different pitches and creating one long, continuously vibrating chord. A pair of grasshoppers is lined up behind one another on a blade of grass. One of them has lost a hind leg but still enthusiastically draws its remaining leg against its rigid wing case like a bow over the strings of a violin, producing half the song of its neighbour. In contrast, crickets produce their song using only their hind legs and my mind wanders down a rabbit hole wondering about one-legged crickets – do they vibrate their remaining leg against a phantom limb and wonder why they have been silenced? The song is surprisingly complex, and what sounds to me like simple vibrations convey a multitude of messages to their fellow hoppers, from romantic overtures to defensive threats and danger warnings. A large cricket lands on my knee – it has neon green flashes on its legs and a C-shaped neon curve on its flank like a Nike tick. It is a Roesel's bush-cricket. Its body is plated with chitinous armour and it waves around long, elegant antennae that protrude from the top of its head. It is not a native species to the UK but was first recorded in England in the mid-19th century. Once only found in the south of the country, they are steadily spreading as climate change leads to warmer weather, slowly but surely edging the limits of their distribution further north. In a swift motion too fast for my eyes to decipher it extends its powerful hind legs and flicks back into the long grass.

A grey heron and a pair of little egrets are browsing at the edge of the far pond. There is an abundance of pond snails littering the sandy bed as though they have been cast there carelessly. The largest of them, the great pond snail, has a long, sharply pointed spiral shell and is often walking on the ceiling of its aquatic world, using the surface tension to adhere its muscular foot to the underside of the water surface. They no doubt make a tasty snack, but the grebe chicks would also be easy targets for the large grey heron, and its continuous presence at the ponds poses an ominous threat. It is an impressive bird with long, sturdy legs that lift its body away from the water like stilts. Its wings appear to be wrapped around it like a shawl edged with light grey fronds slung over its shoulders, and the black cap on its head terminates in long streamers that trail behind it in the breeze. Its small, pale eyes are sharp and quietly penetrating but it is the dagger-like beak that sends a chill down the spine. Powerful jabs into the water dispatch whatever unfortunate prey it is stalking but this can provide little

more than an appetizer for such a large bird. When it takes off, lifting into the air noiselessly on long, arched wings, it folds its long neck into a tight U-bend, circling the ponds a few times before disappearing over the tree tops.

Satisfied with my sketches I head for home and every footstep through the long grass sends up a shower of crickets and grasshoppers. The great burnet is in flower and blood-red pompoms float among the feathery grasses. I pass a bare patch of dusty soil and see a gathering of flying ants, their fat black bodies denser and larger than those of their wingless sisters. The swarms leaving the nests at this time of year consist of new queens and males in search of a mate. Although they emerge from the nest together, their destinies are entirely different. The queens, once mated, will land and shed their cumbersome wings as they search for a suitable nesting site to start a colony of their own. The males are not so fortunate. Once they have fertilized the new queens, their role is complete, and they will die shortly after mating. The abundance of ants during these swarming events provides food for many different species.

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It's mid-August and there is once again a sense of shifting foundations. The days are still warm and long but autumn is hustling impatiently in the wings. The hawthorn flowers have transformed into swollen green berries that are just beginning to blush and they hang from lichen-encrusted branches in large clusters. Unripe green crab apples cling tightly to their boughs as the August sunshine coaxes them to sweeten and young green elderberries form sprays where there were once flamboyant umbels that smelled like honey. The riotous blackthorn carnival of early spring has failed to yield an abundance of fruit. Here and there shy sloes peek out from among the leaves, their coats frosted like breath on a cold window pane. The insects seemed slow to awaken this year and I wonder whether the blackthorn flowers had given up before they arrived.

Tall stands of rosebay willowherb line the hedgerows and a flush of pink stretches across the landscape. Cerise flowers are chased up the stem by feathery down that escapes like wisps of smoke. It is the favourite food plant of the elephant hawk moth caterpillar and I spend more time than is healthy searching for them but so far have had no success.

Many of this year's juvenile birds are around, fledged from their parents' care and ready to face the oncoming change of seasons independently. Their youth is visible in their plumage – similar to their parents but just different enough to make you question your identification of them – at least to my inexperienced eyes. It seems to have been

a good year for green woodpeckers and there are several young birds around the house, their plumage dusted with freckles that disappear in adulthood. We're used to hearing their yaffling call, jarring and loud, carrying across the farm but rarely catch sight of them. These younger birds are brave and numerous, and after loudly announcing their presence with a raucous laugh, they swoop between trees with their distinctive undulating flight. Green woodpeckers like to eat ants, using their strong beaks to break into nests, and they thrive in a habitat that can offer them a combination of mature trees and closely cropped grass. It's an example of why low densities of grazing animals are vital as part of a complex, dynamic ecosystem.

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It's showery this afternoon so instead of heading out, I retrieve the memory card from one of the trail cameras I had left on the track and, with a hot mug of coffee, I embark on some wildlife watching from the comfort of my office. Unsurprisingly, there are hours and hours of rabbit footage, both day and night. The occasional hare lopes down the track and foxes are regular visitors. On sunny afternoons, blackbirds diligently search for worms in the grassy strip that runs down the middle of the track. Occasionally a fat moth triggers the sensor and once or twice an unsuspecting pair of legs in wellies is caught unawares. At one point, a kestrel swoops right in front of the camera and I suspect that it lands on the post to which the camera is attached. Slowing the film down, the footage

is amazing – the kestrel's yellow-rimmed eyes look straight into the lens, wings outstretched in perfect symmetry and black-tipped tail fanned out like a rudder slowing it down as it comes into land. Clutched in one bright yellow claw is a field vole.

If ever there was a symbol of the devastating loss of wildlife we have suffered in our country, it is encapsulated in the story of the hedgehog. Once they could be found snuffling for slugs and worms under every hedgerow, ubiquitous and common, the prickly symbol of the countryside. We love our hedgehogs, but this love has not been enough to sustain them, and the hedgehog is now at risk of complete extinction. Wildness has been driven out of our country, relegated to the margins and what is left remains in isolated fragments. We have broken up the networks of connectivity that hedgehogs need to sustain their nocturnal wanderings with tarmac, impenetrable garden boundaries and ever-enlarging agricultural fields. Pesticides and cultivation have led to a catastrophic decline in their prey and competition for resources has left them vulnerable to predation. We try to exonerate ourselves by blaming the decline on a burgeoning badger population, badgers being the only predator undeterred by the hedgehog's spines. When it tries to curl into a tight ball, the badger's long claws can prise it apart, giving it access to the hedgehog's soft, vulnerable underbelly. But hedgehog numbers are in free fall even where badgers are absent. Where the habitat is rich and intact with plenty of food, the two species have been shown to live alongside one another happily. The numbers are hard to ascertain, but is estimated that the UK population now numbers around 800,000 hogs, and as many 300,000 are killed on the road each year – their defensive instinct to curl up into a tight, prickly ball is their undoing when faced with a four wheeled foe. The situation is bleak.

Fortunately, hedgehogs are still clinging on here. The dense thorny scrub alongside the track provides them with protection and as night falls they emerge, led by their noses in search of juicy morsels. The trail camera switches from daylight mode, capturing shadowy images that are devoid of colour. Small, bright eyes nestle like berries in the soft fur of their face that morphs into keratinous quills, dark at the base and fading to blonde. The rotund ball of prickles is elevated from the ground by dark little legs, and they are surprisingly agile as they forage, their senses alerted to the dangers that may lurk around every corner.

I come to the end of the footage and it's still raining but I need to get outside. I put on my wellies and let the warm summer rain freshen my lungs and dampen my hair as it nourishes the dry soils.

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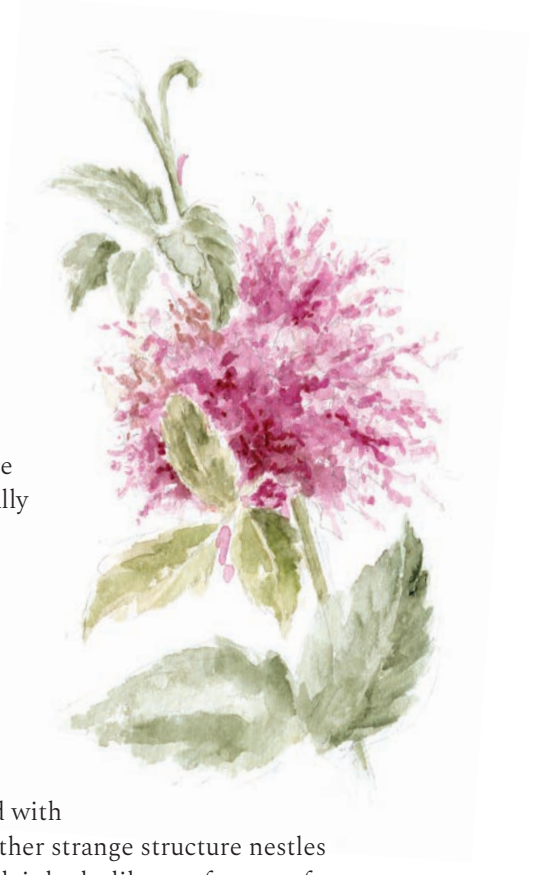

Gentle breezes push soft ripples across the surface of the pond like folds in fabric and the low, swollen sun lights them with a warm, livid glow. Now joined by this year's offspring, swallows that bred in the local area (but sadly not in our barn) gather in larger numbers. They skim the surface for unsuspecting insects that skate on the surface tension. Occasionally they graze the surface, splashing their white bellies into the water that licks their feathers clean.

Wild roses, their indigestible seeds planted across the farm by the many animals and birds that enjoy their fruits, appear in disorganized tangles. Long whips form thorny arches studded with orange hips. Alongside them, another strange structure nestles between the thorns. Raspberry red, it looks like a soft mass of mossy, feather-like fronds. It is a robin's pincushion. The presence of an egg, laid into a leaf bud by an amber-legged wasp, *Diplolepis rosae*, performs a chemical magic trick that instructs the bud to develop into this intricate structure that will nurse the wasp's larvae through the winter. The 'robin' in its name refers not to the bird but to a wood sprite, a more ancient meaning of the word.

The heavy air feels languid and lazy. I've come out to sketch in the late sun but I'm struggling to motivate myself. Elvis and Claude are with me and they seem keen to get home too. Every time it looks like I'm preparing to leave, they dart ahead, extending their leads to the maximum, then look at me impatiently, wearily wandering back when they realize I'm not ready yet. Eventually I give in, and we walk along the mown path through the newly planted woodland at the edge of Fox Cover. The dogs are delighted and bound along the path.

Elvis stops suddenly a little way ahead, his head tilted. As I catch him up, I spot what had captured his attention. A hole in the ground around the size of a football is littered with the dead bodies of red-tailed bumblebees. A lone bee floats around aimlessly, her jet black, furry body dipped in molten amber. The nest has been excavated by a hungry badger, raiding its nectar stores and eating the juicy larvae developing in brood cells. Red-tailed bumblebees nest underground in cavities, often using abandoned rodent burrows. Although not their usual diet, badgers are opportunistic hunters, and its strong claws would have made light work of excavating the nest.

As the lonely bee buzzes off, Elvis is satisfied with his investigation and trots off after Claude in the direction of home.

Later that evening, Jack has gone to play tennis with some friends and I'm sitting with the dogs about to see if I can find anything to watch on TV. A retching sound coming from behind the sofa alerts me to the fact that Claude is being sick. I leap up in an attempt to move him off the carpet and onto the hard floor in the corridor as a means of damage limitation, but as I get close, he suddenly loses his balance and is rolling around unable to get up. I've never seen anything like this before and start to panic. I ring the vet who says he will meet me at the practice. I manage to get Claude to stop rolling and he just lies on the floor panting. I get a blanket to make him more comfortable in the car. He manages to trot after me, but I can see he's still struggling to balance, swaying like a drunk as he follows me outside. This little dog never leaves

our side. He loves coming with us whenever we head out in the car, and even in his current state he seems to be cheered that we're going out for a ride, but the poor thing hates the vet. His experience of this place up to now is being poked and prodded or jabbed with needles. Even now, he doesn't want to go inside, and I can feel his small body shivering as I take him in. He has stopped being sick but he's still wobbly and drooling continuously. The vet's verdict is that he has most likely ingested some kind of poison, possibly an insecticide. I am incredulous. What? How? We use no pesticides at all on the land and don't store anything like that anywhere on the farm. I can't understand how this could have happened – he just wouldn't have access to anything like it. The vet reassures me. They will give him some activated charcoal and put him on a drip which should do the trick. A nurse is on the way to look after him through the night. He whimpers as I leave but I cheerfully tell him I'll see him in the morning.

In the morning, the vet rings me at 8 am. Claude passed away overnight. We are all inconsolable. I am consumed by guilt because I am the one who took him out the night before. I must have taken my eyes off him for a split second at the wrong time. I feel terrible that I didn't anticipate this outcome and stay to comfort him at the vets. I can't bear the thought of him being alone and frightened. Claude was our first family dog. Bright, bold and full of joy, he was a one-off. We all loved Claude, and he loved us, but he definitely had a favourite. He was utterly devoted to Jack. All day long he followed him around like a little black shadow. Wherever Jack went, Claude followed. He was never meant to belong to Jack but for some reason, an unbreakable bond formed between them, and Jack is completely devastated by Claude's sudden death. I have to admit, I never fully understood the terrible feeling of losing a much-loved animal until now. He was part of our family, and we all feel his absence with the intensity of a raw, angry wound. I keep thinking I can hear the tinkling sound his collar made and then the shock hits me all over again. Poor Elvis is confused and keeps looking quizzically at Claude's empty bed. He's quiet and subdued, mirroring the mood engulfing the rest of the family.

We bury Claude's small body under an oak tree, the same tree that also watches over my mum's ashes. The vet could shed no more light on the mystery poison. Our best guess is that he ate some grass that was contaminated by ergot, a psychoactive fungus that infects the florets of flowering grasses and can be found at this time of year, an innocuous fruiting body hiding away in the ears of rye grasses. I doubt we'll ever know for sure.