



**London
Wildlife
Trust**

Fivefields
8–10 Grosvenor Gardens
London
SW1W 0DH
020 7261 0447
enquiries@wildlondon.org.uk
wildlondon.org.uk

Author(s): Mathew Frith
Date: 2009, 2013, 2017, rev 2023
Owner: Conservation
Review Date: May 2025

New Wilderness and Rewilding Policy

There are a growing number of schemes underway within Britain setting aside large tracts of land where natural processes will play a greater role in management, to help reverse the loss of biodiversity that has occurred over many decades. These rewilding projects are gaining traction and popular interest, and the term ‘rewilding’ is increasingly being used for any initiative to enable nature’s recovery (and our attitudes to it), including gardens parks and roadside verges. Some rewilding schemes involve the re-introduction of large animals (‘megafauna’) previously extinct from Britain (or more commonly semi-domestic proxies of these) and establishing practices at odds with some current nature conservation land management practices. They raise issues about future landscapes where we may relax intensity of control to make some of them wilder than they currently are, and how they may also help us adapt to climate change, progress to net zero carbon, and contribute to our wellbeing. Given that there are now schemes being shaped along these rewilding approaches within London, this sets out the Trust’s position.

1. Policy

- London Wildlife Trust supports the principle of re-wilding and the creation of new wilderness areas where natural processes are allowed to predominate in Britain to:
- help restore lost and damaged habitats and provide opportunities for the recovery and restoration of the abundance of wild fauna, flora and fungi through natural processes in line with landscape scale nature recovery and the Government’s ‘30 by 30’ commitments.
- to provide a viable ecological network to enable the reintroduction of wildlife, including species previously lost or in danger of extinction from the British Isles;
- to help undertake landscape-scale adaptation to meet the challenges of climate change and a means to help reach net zero emissions by 2050;
- to help engage people with their understanding of the natural environment;
- to facilitate research on natural processes and ecological function in future landscape management.
- We support the creation of landscape-scale projects within and around London which would benefit biodiversity and people’s connection with nature, some of which might approach the definition of wilderness, and believe that there are opportunities to deliver more as part of a Nature Recovery Network);

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- We endorse the definition of rewilding for London and the recommendations of the London Rewilding Taskforce;
- We believe Nature Recovery Networks and similar initiatives identified through a London Nature Recovery Strategy provide the opportunity to further the delivery of re-wilding and wilderness approaches, and that these should be supported where and when appropriate;
- Re-wilding initiatives should take account of existing ecology interests and the management regimes required to conserve these, recognise how re-wilding may lead to declines and/or losses of some habitats and species associated with them, and set out how to mitigate this as best possible;
- We will work with Government agencies, the Mayor of London, local authorities, landowners and other stakeholders to explore opportunities to establish re-wilding and wilderness projects (based on rigorous ecological rationale) within and around London, and seek to help deliver these;
- Rewilding schemes in London should aim to take a socially inclusive approach from the outset, designed to be accessible (in the broadest sense) and be informed by the communities most likely to be impacted by them.

The Trust will review this policy and amend it following any changes to legislation, planning guidance or scientific evidence, as appropriate.

2. Context

Definitions

Wilderness is land where human influences are withdrawn or minimised and natural processes – in the main – predominate. For example, grazing by livestock, tillage of arable land, and cyclical management of woodlands would be replaced by the wind, rain, sun, frost, tides, storms, natural growth and decay, and the behaviours of wild animals, plants and fungi.

The creation of new wilderness – rewilding – is generally accepted as ‘the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself. Rewilding seeks to reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species – allowing them to shape the landscape and the habitats within. (Rewilding Britain).

This can be further divided into proactive rewilding, such as the deliberate introduction of ecosystem engineers, and passive rewilding, where the human hand is removed and natural colonisation and processes are allowed to develop on their own accord. Arguably many urban brownfields and railway lineside woodlands are forms of rewilding, but due probably to their familiarity not generally considered as such.

Some schools of thought believe that wilderness (and some rewilding) should exclude people and all evidence of human activities; others suggest that human presence should be reduced to the lightest possible. However, in urban areas, where the presence of people is a day-to-day reality, rewilding presents opportunities to relax the intensity of management, and encourage natural processes to have a greater role, although the scales to achieve this are much more limited. The term rewilding has become further confused by its contemporary use to define any activity that

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helps to enhance biodiversity or the natural character of an area, no matter the scale or intensity of management. This is recognised in the London Rewilding Taskforce's report (q.v.):

Rewilding as a concept is about allowing natural processes to operate as best as possible to restore natural ecosystems and assist in nature's recovery. In doing so, rewilding can provide richer and better functioning habitats for wildlife and associated benefits for people.

Rewilding can help people to reconnect with nature while simultaneously providing one of the pathways to a more sustainable future by combatting the linked climate and ecological emergencies. Adopting rewilding will require working and living in nature-positive ways that benefit wider society.

We recognise that 'rewilding' is now widely used to describe a spectrum of nature conservation projects, initiatives, and activities at every scale from wildlife gardening through to light-touch nature reserve management and ecological restoration at the landscape scale.

History

Britain has very little land that could be called purely natural or wilderness; primarily some cliff faces too steep to support grazing and of no value for mineral extraction. Consequently, the country's biodiversity has been highly altered by our activities; it is estimated that much of the original landscape and biodiversity had been changed by the time of the Roman invasion. Since then, further technical revolutions in agriculture, industry and urbanisation have led to a largely depleted and changed ecology.

Early nature conservation practices in North America and Eastern Europe looked to the protection and management of large areas of wilderness as a key cornerstone, in recognition of the need to halt some of the ecological devastation that was occurring and, primarily, because they had large areas of relatively wild land requiring protection and the space at hand. This practice was under-pinned by the philosophies of 19th century naturalist writers, such as Henry Thoreau and John Muir, who called for the need to provide spiritual retreat from modern society. By the 20th century a highly managed landscape within Britain, with little room for manoeuvre, led to nature conservation adopting a practice and philosophy of protecting a network of largely isolated fragments of surviving parcels of semi-natural habitats, and managing these (often intensively) to retain or enhance the existing habitats and species or restoring those recently lost. This has remained largely unchanged until recently.

A growing number of voices began to challenge the orthodoxy, especially from the early 1990s, for a variety of reasons. There was concern that trying to protect and conserve this network of sites within a sea of unsympathetic activity was hardly sustainable. It was also viewed as an inward-looking, largely negative approach, always on the back-foot of diminishing resources and influence. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan process (from 1994) could have unleashed the sector from this thinking, but instead became overly bureaucratic and, inevitably, served to reinforce the orthodoxy. Frustration at this led to a disparate group of interests to step back and think differently; Rebuilding Biodiversity was an initial framework developed in 2001-02 by a conglomerate of British conservation organisations, mostly influenced by ideas and practices being implemented in other parts of Europe.

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Their rewilding philosophy was challenging a long-held belief that the ancient pre-human landscape of Europe – and Britain – was mostly enclosed forest, and that an open mosaic of grasslands with mixed scrub and woodland, maintained by herbivores, was more likely. On this basis nature's recovery could be based on restoring ecological functions on land through the reassembly of large herbivore 'guilds' (e.g. feral horse, elk, bison, deer) that could behave like extinct species, and themselves being kept in check by apex predators (as had been witnessed through the reintroduction of wolf into Yellowstone National Park in 1995). Elsewhere, especially in Scotland and Wales, some people began doing similar things for themselves by acquiring large parcels of land, and removing traces of previous management and starting the processes of ecological recovery (e.g. Alladale Wilderness Estate in the Highlands).

Initial resistance to introduce European beaver in Scotland in the early 2000s has since progressed to the point that there are many hundreds in the wild across lowland Britain, as with wild boar, accidentally introduced in the 1980s. Both are important keystone species, acting as ecosystem engineers in being able to alter habitats to the extent they can deliver broader ecological benefits. The first stages of the introduction of another ecosystem engineer, European bison, began in Kent in 2021, and planned reintroductions of pine martin, polecat, Scottish wildcat, white-tailed sea eagle, eagle owl and sturgeon are also in train. Proposals to re-introduce European lynx, wolf and brown bear are also on the agenda, but not without controversy. In southern England the costs of managing sea defences has already led to the creation of innovative 'managed coastal realignment' schemes (e.g. Abbots Hall Farm in Essex, and Medmerry, near Selsey in West Sussex) and novel river basin management schemes that allow natural processes to function more fully. Indeed, the potential impacts of climate change in terms of flood-water management, soil erosion, and water abstraction probably provide the vehicle for large scale rewilding and wilderness creation.

3. Legislation and policy

There is no legislation that specifically underpins, promotes or constrains rewilding. The Natural Environment White Paper (2018), states that the Government will "support nature's recovery and restore losses suffered over the past 50 years. We will develop a strategy for nature to tackle biodiversity loss, develop a Nature Recovery Network to complement and connect our best wildlife sites, and provide opportunities for species conservation and the reintroduction of native species." It makes specific commitment to "provide an additional 500,000 hectares of wildlife habitat building on other plans for landscape-scale recovery for peatland, woodlands and natural flood management." Rewilding isn't mentioned, but is perhaps implicit in the term 'landscape-scale'; the Knepp Estate (q.v.) is referenced as an "an interesting example" of such an approach. Further, through pressure by conservation NGOs, the Government committed in 2019 to protect 30% of the UK's land for nature by 2030 ('30 by 30'). This was reinforced at COP15 in 2022 with the ratification of the Global Biodiversity Framework by 196 countries, including the target of 'Effective conservation and management of at least 30% of the world's lands, inland waters,

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coastal areas and oceans, with emphasis on areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and services.’ This is referred to as the ‘30 by 30’ deal.

The Environment Act (2021) likewise makes no specific reference to rewilding but commits to the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies to help deliver a Nature Recovery Network, within which examples of rewilding are likely to play a role. In early 2023 the Environment Secretary, Thérèse Coffey, announced at the NFU Annual Conference that she would not support reintroduction of wolf or lynx into the UK, suggesting rewilding may only be legitimised through narrower parameters than what some conservationists have been calling for.

There is numerous other legislation and policy that wilderness proposals will need to consider, for example those likely to affect the flood risk of waterbodies (e.g. for beaver), Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, and the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981.

4. Future wilderness for London

Much of the initial debate and focus for new wilderness in Britain justifiably focused on the more remote highlands and islands of Scotland and Wales. Nevertheless, the lowlands of England have more recently begun to showcase opportunities for reimagining and rewilding land. A vision for a large new ‘wildwood’ across West Sussex was proposed by officers of Sussex WT in 1994, aimed to link reversing biodiversity loss, with tourism, local food and natural produce economies, and sustainable river catchment management. Whilst this idea fell initially on stony ground it sowed the seeds for what has subsequently been developed further at the Knepp Estate south of Horsham since the early 2000s. Within 20 years the estate has been transformed and currently holds nationally important numbers of nightingale, turtle dove and purple emperor butterfly (all previously absent from the site and in the immediate environs). Knepp has become a beacon of the possible in an agricultural landscape.

Such a vision could be transposed to similar-sized areas on the outskirts of London, where there may be opportunities for exploring these ideas further. However, the scale of any such projects would make the long-term retention of any habitat other than woodland difficult without intervention, and the challenges of introducing or pro-actively large wild herbivores, such as wild boar (let alone predators) close to conurbations would compound this further. Wild deer numbers are already historically high, and deer collisions with vehicles are already causing concern in some areas on the fringes of the capital. Crucially the approach may require a ‘lighter human touch’ rather than adopting outright wilderness, for example natural flood management afforestation schemes, such as being developed at Enfield Chase or opportunities for arable and ley pasture reversion, such as at Thames Chase, Tolworth Court Farm or in the Colne Valley.

Rewilding Britain recommends that the minimum size where wild areas can become ecologically viable is 100 hectares (but ideally upwards of 250 ha); in London this largely focuses the rewilding potential within the Metropolitan Green Belt and on the city’s borders of surrounding counties. Epping Forest, at 2,430ha and straddling Essex and London is a wilderness of sorts with strong ecological roots dating back to Medieval times. Managed by the City of London “in order to ensure the preservation and management of the unclosed parts thereof as an Open Space for

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the recreation and enjoyment of the public; and for other purposes” (Epping Forest Act 1878), it has a complex and often interventionist management in order to meet the City of London’s legal obligations. With major roads criss-crossing it, over 4 million visitors annually, high levels of deer vehicle collisions and fly-tipping; it gives a flavour of the issues that urban rewilding projects would need to consider.

The London Environment Strategy (2018) seeks an increase in the quantity and quality of priority habitats but doesn’t specify how these might be achieved. However, in 2022 the Mayor of London convened a London Rewilding Taskforce, on which the Trust was represented, which published its report in March 2023. This set out a series of principles, recommendations, and an indicative map of where rewilding at a landscape scale might be considered (see Appendix I). At the time of writing, the Report’s recommendations will be delivered through a process to be determined by the GLA, and which the Trust will continue to influence.

The Trust is a member of the Rewilding Britain Network.

5. Risks and opportunities

Criticism of rewilding schemes has tended to focus on the removal of land from potential economic use, exclusion of people from the land, removal of traces of past use and management, whether the space is available or viable for natural processes to function, impacts of introduced animals (especially predators), and the potential of anti-people – or overtly nationalist – political interests taking hold (there are, for example, synergies with elements of the ‘survivalist’ movement). There is no doubt that some individuals engaged with the wilderness ‘debate’ hold views that support such criticism, but ultimately the future success of any new wildernesses will largely rest on political good-will, and recognition that society would be ready to support them. More recently, concerns over food and energy security may push back on land availability for rewilding in much of lowland Britain. In addition, commitments on a replacement of land management subsidies post-Brexit, may yield less resources to deliver public goods through rewilding than previously anticipated.

Ethics also raises its head. Oostvaardersplas, barely 30km from central Amsterdam, has been a model for new wilderness in a densely-populated country and intensively managed landscape. This became the focus for implementing the theories of the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera, who argued that the natural conditions created by large herbivores in particular (from geese to bison) steered natural succession, resulting in a kaleidoscope of grassland, shrubs, scrubs, trees and groves, rather than a ‘closed forest’ system. The plan here led to the introduction of herds of Heck cattle, Konik ponies and other herbivores to create this mosaic. It was also to let nature take its course amongst these animals; if one become ill it was to be left to die and decay. However, this led to outcries and contravened animal welfare law in the Netherlands; subsequently the site is subject to a greater human intervention than originally planned.

Nevertheless, the growing interest in rewilding schemes already underway, are already showing the benefits they can provide for biodiversity, and local rural economies. There is evidence that such approaches can provide tangible ecosystem service benefits, for example, water quality,

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surface water management, soil health, and climate change resilience. Understandably there is a blurring between rewilding, for example at Knepp and more traditional nature conservation activities at a larger scale (e.g. at Ebernoe Common) both in West Sussex, although to much of the public the distinction is probably rather meaningless if both can assist in nature's recovery. To many, perhaps more importantly, the philosophy of rewilding offers an “empowering, hopeful and ambitious” nature conservation approach building on the protectionist and defensive models developed over the 20th century. In this context it's a philosophy the Trust embraces.

6. References

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7. Links

BANC - www.banc.org.uk
John Muir Trust - www.jmt.org/
Knepp Wildland - <https://knepp.co.uk/>
Large Herbivore Foundation - www.largeherbivore.org
Rewilding Britain - www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/
Rewilding Europe - www.rewildingeurope.com/
Wild Europe - www.wildeurope.org/
7. Related Trust policies
Conservation grazing (2012)
Deer in London (2014)
London's Green Belt (2007, 2019 update)
Reserves Management Policy (2011, 2019 update)
Tree Planting and New Woodlands (2009, 2013 update)

8. FAQs

Where are the wildernesses?

- The first schemes were mostly designed for areas where very few people live and economic activity is declining or almost absent, such as the Scottish Highlands and Islands, the uplands of England and Wales, such as at Bamff Estate in Perthshire, Wild Ennerdale in Cumbria and Benshaw Moor in Northumberland;
- Nearer to London are the Knepp Estate in West Sussex and the Great Fen in Cambridgeshire, both projects began in the early 2000s to restore habitats and diversify income streams to replace existing agricultural subsidies. More recently have been the initial steps at the Pirbright Ranges in Surrey, and the afforestation of land at Trent Park and Enfield Chase in north London.

Are these projects releasing dangerous animals?

- Potentially, yes. Current proposals include the introduction of European beaver (extinct by 1300, a small populations are now in Scotland, Devon and Kent), as well some very old breeds of horse and cattle (as close as possible to wild species). Some have already been successfully trialled, such as Konik pony (similar to tarpan, a horse) initially in Suffolk but now widespread, and white-tailed sea eagle (Europe's largest bird of prey) in western Scotland, Wales and Isle of Wight;
- Wild boar were accidentally released into parts of Sussex, Devon, Gloucestershire and north Wales in the 1980s and '90s, and are now firmly established. These are likely to be constituents of

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large-scale woodland wilderness schemes. There are recent records of their presence in Greater London and they do pose some risk – but no different to those other parts of Europe where they live;

- Wild deer are increasing in numbers and distribution throughout the outer surrounds of London through natural colonisation, and whilst individuals are rarely dangerous, males in the rutting season are territorial and can be aggressive. More worryingly high numbers of deer can have adverse impacts on woodland habitats, and can lead to vehicle collisions through their nocturnal ranging.
- Plans are underway to release European lynx (extinct since c700AD) into parts of England and Scotland; these are not considered a risk to people, but there is resistance from some farmers;
- In the longer term wolf (extinct late 18th century), brown bear (extinct after Roman occupation), elk (latest record c3,900 ya) and European bison (latest record 12,800 ya) have been considered, although it is recognised that a whole series of constraining factors will need to be considered before any introductions proceed;
- Nevertheless, it is hard to see how true wilderness projects could succeed without the introduction of large or ‘apex’ predators; in their absence, herbivore numbers would have to be controlled by human intervention (culling or removal of animals), which is why more carefully designed rewilding approaches in or near urban areas will be more appropriate;
- Evidence from elsewhere in Europe and North America suggests that wilderness projects with large wild animals can provide tangible tourism benefits.

Is there the potential for re-wilding spaces in or close to London?

- Possibly, yes, to meet a range of environmental benefits (including biodiversity and climate change adaptation), recreation and tourism;
- The main constraints are that: space in London is at premium, land ownership is relatively fragmented, most public land already serves many functions, and land values are high. However, there are some areas such as the Colne Valley, the upper Lea Valley, north-west Enfield and around the Thames Chase between Hainault Forest and Rainham where relatively large-scale landscape projects (for London) could develop along wilderness principles – some of these can be potentially encapsulated in Nature Recovery Networks or similar landscape scale initiatives (see Appendix I);
- There are currently no proposals to reintroduce any previously extinct large animals to London, apart from beaver (Enfield, 2021, Ealing, 2023). The successful reintroduction of red kite in the Chilterns is likely to lead to them returning to breed naturally to the city but these are not dangerous. There are likely to be the introductions of smaller species, such as invertebrates and reptiles, as part of rewilding schemes to help enhance their population distribution, status and genetic resilience.
- See Climate change and London’s Green Belt policies.

Is there danger of the spread of diseases/parasites from wild animals to livestock or pets?

- Possibly, yes, as there already is. However, the planned reintroduction of wild animals (primarily vertebrates) have to undergo a licensing process, in which pathogens, welfare, ecological and



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economic impacts are taken into account, often followed by a trial period within a managed enclosure. Nevertheless, many of the introductions of beaver and birds of prey in parts of Britain have been illicit.

Appendix I: Excerpts from Rewilding London; Final report of the London Rewilding Taskforce (2023)¹

Principles for Rewilding in London

1. Let nature lead

Rewilding projects seek to reinstate, as far as is possible, natural processes such as habitat succession and ecological disturbance, i.e. natural events or forces that bring about changes in the spatial pattern and structure of habitats or species distribution. This could, for example, include re-establishing or reintroducing animal species like beavers or native rare breeds, or removing artificial river channels to kickstart natural processes. While rewilding projects are not geared to reach any human-defined end state, instead going where nature takes them, rewilding in the urban context will inevitably be heavily influenced by the built environment and cultural attitudes, and will require appropriate levels of human management and intervention.

2. Work at an appropriate scale for the urban context

Rewilding focuses on restoring ecosystems with enough space and time to allow nature to drive the changes and to shape the living systems on which we all depend. Scale may come from rewilding a large single landholding or several contiguous landholdings, which particularly in an urban context, could involve connecting natural habitats via a significant ecological corridor, such as floodplain grasslands within a river valley or along railway embankments.

3. Create resilient landscapes by considering the past, present and future

Ancient habitats and some of the species that existed within them will guide rewilding projects, providing inspiration for what might be possible. However, rewilding recognises that we can never recover the past – conditions have irrevocably changed and nature, itself, is constantly evolving. Rewilding is about understanding how dynamic natural processes in the past generated biodiversity; and then using that knowledge and working with the tools we have at our disposal today to kickstart dynamic ecosystems again, where nature is allowed to respond and evolve, while also taking into account climate change and population growth.

Rewilded landscapes provide natural resilience to climate change, giving trees, plants and wildlife a greater chance of survival by increasing population exchange, genetic diversity, and the ability to move and adapt in response to climate change, pollution and other pressures. Schemes will need to be sensitive to how valued existing habitats and species might respond to rewilding approaches and ensure that they are not inadvertently negatively impacted. Rewilding can be driven by large eco-engineer species but could also be configured to accommodate the natural

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colonisation and, if appropriate, introduction of smaller species (such as invertebrates, small mammals, reptiles, plants) to facilitate their population resilience in and around London.

4. Ensure rewilding can be experienced by all

Whilst nature recovery through natural processes is the driving force of rewilding, a significant additional benefit of rewilding projects is the provision of nature-rich experiences for a large and diverse urban population, recognising the significant mental and physical health and well-being benefits these are likely to bring. Planning for access for as many people as is tenable from the very beginning of the design and development process is essential. This should not encourage increased journeys by car, except for those with impaired mobility. Rewilding at an appropriate scale can help achieve a balance between public access and recovering nature, acknowledging that there will usually need to be parts of rewilding sites protected from disturbance by people.

5. Recognise opportunities to support local economies

Rewilding can support opportunities for nature-based economies based around leisure, education, and recreation. It can help to rebuild and deliver essential ecosystem services such as flood management, air purification, water quality improvements, carbon storage, wildlife recovery, heat regulation, soil restoration, and nature-friendly food production. As well as nature recovery, rewilding provides an opportunity to enhance livelihoods, including through the development of sustainable business opportunities.

1 www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/environment-and-climate-change/parks-green-spaces-and-biodiversity/london-rewilding-taskforce

Recommendations

1. Enable development of large-scale rewilding projects in London to support nature recovery and greater resilience of biodiversity.

1.1: The Mayor should include the large-scale rewilding opportunity zones identified by the Taskforce as strategic areas in London's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

1.2: Establish and resource a London Rewilding Action Group to develop a pilot large-scale rewilding project in London and catalyse delivery alongside delivery of the LNRS.

1.3: Improve and identify new funding opportunities for rewilding projects by:

a. advocate for new and existing government and other funding streams to be able to support rewilding in urban areas.

b. the London Rewilding Action Group (see Recommendation 1.2) should capture learnings from project development related to funding and financing to share for future projects.

c. With the London Rewilding Action Group, the Mayor should commission further work on identifying options for sustainable financing for rewilding projects in London, including investigating opportunities to leverage private investment in biodiversity and other ecosystem services.

1.4: The Mayor should use his position to advocate to Government to:

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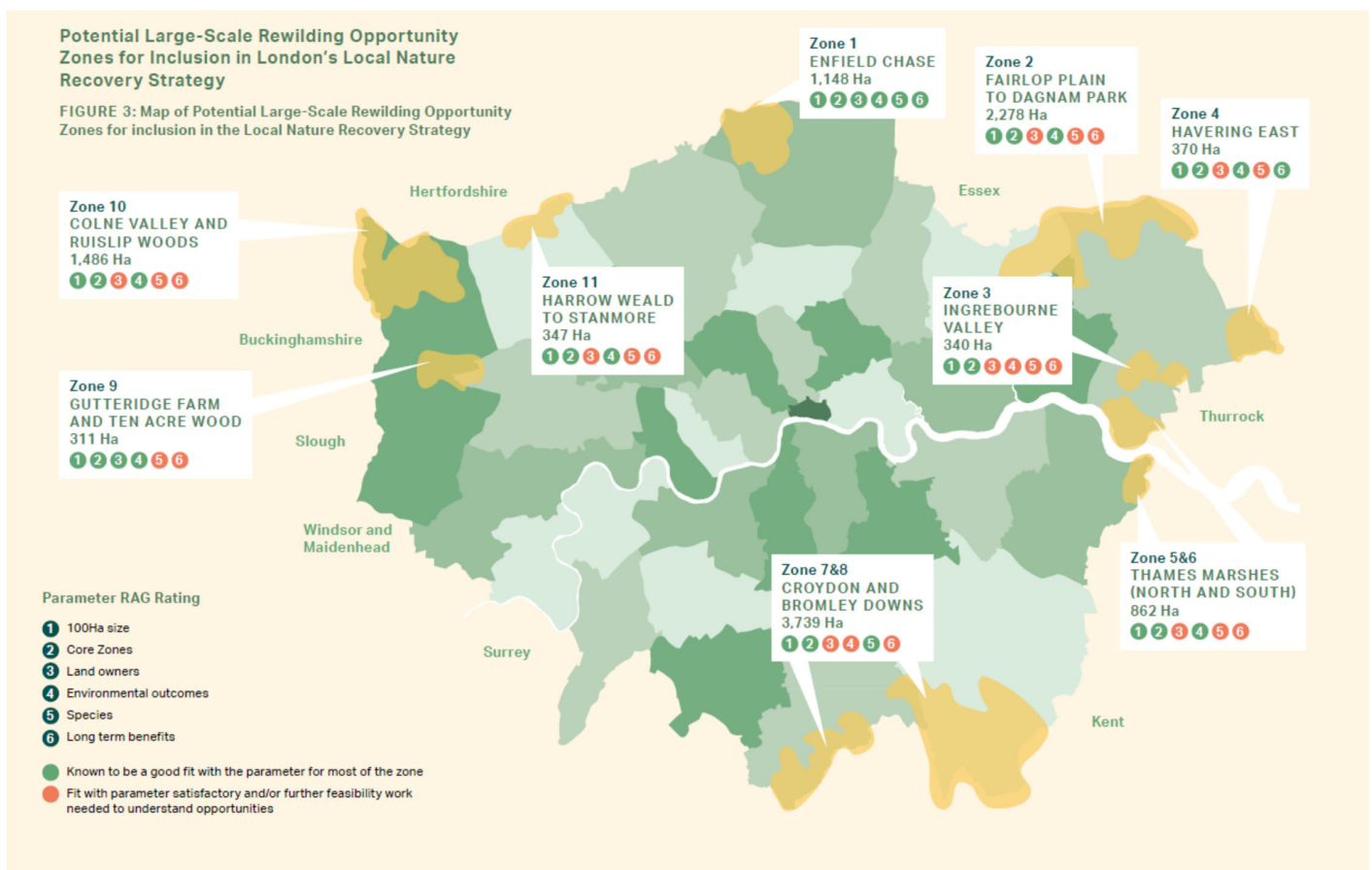


**London
Wildlife
Trust**

Fivefields
8–10 Grosvenor Gardens
London
SW1W 0DH
020 7261 0447
enquiries@wildlondon.org.uk
wildlondon.org.uk

- a. explore opportunities for improving national planning policy and guidance to enable high quality rewilding in the green belt.
- b. retain and improve national policies that protect nature and incentivise enhancement of the quality of natural spaces.

Potential Large-Scale Rewilding Opportunity Zones



- 2: Support positive long-term management and monitoring of key stepping stone sites so that their role in London's nature network and connections between large-scale rewilding sites is maximised.
- 3: Promote opportunities for Londoners to engage with rewilding and the capital's nature to the benefit of people and wildlife. The key aims of the public engagement recommendation are to:
 - a. galvanise support for large-scale rewilding efforts
 - b. harness the potential of the concept of rewilding to inspire, engage and empower Londoners to act for nature locally.

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3.1: Engage local communities and young people from early stages of project development within identified rewilding opportunity zones (linked to Recommendation 1.2).

3.2: Support activities linked to rewilding ‘stepping stone’ projects that build on existing GLA and partners’ initiatives and that provide meaningful opportunities for Londoners to enhance biodiversity (linked to Recommendation 2).

3.3: Build on public interest and enthusiasm around rewilding to share and reframe messages about nature to promote wilder, more natural approaches to urban greening.

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