

Wilding [PG]

2023 UK 75 mins

UK released **14 June 2024**

Director **David Allen**

Screenplay **Isabella Tree** (based on the book: 'Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm')

Cinematography **Tim Cragg; Simon De Glanville**

Music **Biggi Hilmars; Jon Hopkins**

Cast (As themselves) **Matthew Burrell; Isabella Tree**

Wilding documents a transformation that started fifteen years ago in Knepp, a crenellated country estate 19th castle in Horsham, deepest Sussex. When the young farming couple took over Knepp the surrounding farmland was drenched in chemicals and the oaks were dying. A fizzing underground chemical circuit board had destroyed the vital microrrhizal network that allows plants – and particularly native oak trees – to thrive and enrich the ground with organic life to grow nutritious crops and re-create a landscape that been missing since the advent of intensive agriculture after the Second World War. Despite their best farming efforts, Charlie and Isabella knew a new approach was needed.

The task ahead was going to be fraught with difficulty because the Knepp's radical approach was weighted by so much public negativity. To their dismay, the couple's presentation was greeted with horror and anger by local farmers: "how are we going to feed the population without intensive farming?". Many others felt the 'privileged' couple threatened to destroy the nature of the British landscape – as we know it – even allowed ragwort to prosper. 'Creeping thistle' is the enemy of farmers and is strictly controlled with pesticides – but more on that later.

With government support, the project eventually got under-way, and ancient breeds of wild native animals were allowed to run free and roam: Tamworth

pigs, Exmoor ponies, red deer and longhorn cattle. Farm animals get fed but this new stock was going to have to fend for themselves. Surprisingly the beasts not only survived, but thrived. Freed from the restrictive practices of intensive farming, the animals reverted to their original natures, pigs even swam and dived for food. In fact, the Tamworth pigs seem to be the smartest, we watch as the sow nourishes herself with nettles for iron after giving birth to her first litter in the Spring.

Gradually wildlife returned to the land and it became a haven for near extinct and dwindling species: Turtle doves, nightingales and field mice numbers were boosting. Today, Knepp has the highest density of songbirds in Britain. And it's the large grazing animals that provide the space needed to foster a habitat for thousands of native species. Beavers have since arrived to control the wetlands – since being granted a government licence – so no more floods that can cause havoc each year.

Eleven million butterflies headed to Britain in 2009 and those landing on the Knepp estate fed off the creeping thistle and devoured it. The following year no creeping thistle came back to the land. Charlie analysed the soil and cowpats and made the discovery that bugs that had been wiped out when the land was turned over to intensive farming had since returned. Now 19 different species of earthworms enrich the soil and provide the rich nutrients that eventually ends up in our food. Sixteen years into the project, Isabella introduced a pair of storks into Knepp – and the birds bred and provided stork chicks, for the first time in 600 hundred years.

MeredithTaylor, *Filmuforia*, 17 June 2024 (abridged)

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