

## Bringing back the glories of the Wild



European bison bull, *Bison bonasus*, in Zuid Kennemerland National Park, The Netherlands. This is Europe's largest herbivore, weighing in at over one thousand kilograms. It was once hunted as close to extinction as any animal can be, with only thirteen remaining at one point. Now, there are around 3,500 European bison roaming in the wild, with another two thousand in captivity. The bison is a dynamic grazer, opening up scrub and forested areas to create glades rich in biodiversity.

# Rewilding: A Conversation with Staffan Widstrand

Eleanor O'Hanlon

Photographs by Staffan Widstrand

*A NEW APPROACH TO NATURE CONSERVATION has been taking shape over the last few decades. It is called Rewilding and it aims to restore the conditions that allow wildlife and ecosystems to thrive, without the need for intensive human management.*

*Rewilders are removing dams to free up the natural flow of rivers. They are bringing back bison and wild horses to the landscapes these animals once helped to shape, and allowing the wolves to return. Then they step back and allow wild communities to manage themselves, as they have always done, through the natural rhythms of growth and decay, and the dynamic networks of relationship that sustain the life of nature.*

*Over the last ten years, a network of "Rewilding" areas has emerged across Europe, stretching from Northern Lapland to the Danube Delta, from Western Spain to the Carpathian Mountains of Romania.*

*One of the founders of this Rewilding Europe network is Staffan Widstrand, a Swedish photographer, author, and dedicated conservationist. I have known Staffan for twenty years. During that time he has won many awards for his photography, published eighteen books, and been recognized as one of the world's most influential nature photographers. He established the Wild Wonders of Europe initiative, which brought Europe's wild heritage to more than eight-hundred-million people through photography, with international outdoor exhibitions, books, magazine and news stories, and online galleries. His new project, Wild Wonders of China, aims to do the same for China's natural heritage and wildlife.*

—Eleanor O'Hanlon

*The forest is a cathedral that  
is not designed by man,  
but by the forest itself.*

**Eleanor O'Hanlon:** *What does "wild" mean to you, Staffan?*

**Staffan Widstrand:** It's about freedom, what it means to be free. Increasingly, we humans are becoming part of big systems. More and more people live within congested settings, and they work within structures that are completely set for them. Wild for me represents freedom, and it represents the hope of freedom. When you see a bird, it is because that bird wants to be there, not because it is part of some business plan. That little plant popping up through the asphalt has taken the opportunity to grow there.

And it is about hope. That bird you see in flight is giving you hope of another life. Then there is what I call the joy of the wild, the sheer joy of it, and that is in our genes. We have that inner sense of the joy of the wild but some people don't experience it because they never have the chance to feel it for themselves.

**EO:** *The root of the word wild, which comes from the Old English and Germanic*



White-tailed eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*, a species once destined for extinction due to persecution, prejudice, pesticides, and chemicals but which since the 1970s has staged a remarkable comeback across large areas in Europe.

*languages, is self-determining. So the word itself refers to the freedom you have just described: the life of the wild, which we humans can never completely control. And when you feel the freedom in yourself, your senses awaken, and you come alive*

*in a new way. My own contacts with the wild have given me the freedom to find something deeper in myself.*

**SW:** The wild is really good for us human beings. Of course we need to preserve biodiversity for its own sake, but we also need the wild for our own.

Without it, our lives become boring, more dangerous and more shallow. Many people resonate with this, because they have experienced for themselves the value of simply walking in nature, how you return feeling refreshed, how

your thinking is clearer and you are more balanced. This shift in attitude is reflected in language: fifty years ago, "wild" had negative connotations, now they are largely positive.

**EO:** *Tell me about the core philosophy of Rewilding and how it differs from conventional approaches to nature conservation.*

**SW:** There is a human tradition of managing landscapes to look a certain way. And that is fine as long as it is done for a specific purpose. The problem is that we have taken the same kind of management that is used in forestry and farming and brought it into nature conservation, where it simply doesn't fit. If you want to create space for wild nature, you can't have management all the time.

We have this slogan in Rewilding Europe: *Just let go*. You create the space, and then you back off and allow natural processes to run their course. You don't try to manage the numbers or decide how many animals there should be.

The animals do that for themselves.

But there is one caveat: you need to bring back those keystone species that were taken out, sometimes even thousands of years ago. Without them—the bison, the wild horse, the wolf—

what happens in that place is not going to be natural, because key aspects of the natural processes are missing.

We have this misconception that Europe was completely covered by dense forest, until man came along and opened it up. In reality, Europe was full of large grazers, like the aurochs, the wild ancestors of our domestic cattle, the wild horse, the red deer, and the bison, most likely in Serengeti numbers. These four were the most important large animals for the natural ecosystem.

In Sweden, and many other countries, their ecological importance has largely been forgotten because they have been absent for so many thousands of years. But in the Carpathian Mountains, in Romania, the bison disappeared only 250 years ago. They are still present in people's minds. They are present in the place names and the stories, and when Rewilding Europe brought the European bison back to the Carpathians, it was, "Welcome back, finally our animals have returned to us." Now the landscape is more whole again.

**EO:** *So culture and communication are also fundamental aspects of Rewilding?*

**SW:** We need to show people the wonders of the natural world, so they can fall in love with it. You can love rhinos even if

you have never seen one in real life. This is why I do this work, and why I travel: seeing is believing. If we're not able to see the wonders of nature, how can we love it? And if we don't love it, nature will not be protected.



A local lady in her garden in the little village of Letea in the Danube Delta, Romania

Our relationship with the natural world has always been, and must again become part of our identity, our sense of who we are: without the animals, without the wild, then *I* am less. Nature conservation has tended to be far too fact-based. There is nothing wrong with

this, but you can't communicate only through facts, you must include strong emotions.

There are millions of people living with acute stress, suffering with panic attacks, and they need nature. They may

not need the Lapland wilderness, but they do need closer connection with the natural world for their own well-being.

In Rewilding Europe we created the slogan "Making Europe a Wilder Place." And we developed something new—an imagined scale of wildness.

I don't mean wilderness. Those are regions where there are no roads or permanent human activity. This scale from one to ten indicates the degrees of relative wildness, and any given area in a modern society can be located

somewhere on that scale. There is a lot at zero, in dense urban areas, and even more at one and two where you have city parks, some with birds and animals, like the parks of Berlin where wild boar are allowed to roam.

Much of nature is between three and five and most of the nature reserves we have now are around six or seven. Areas at nine and ten are rare.

So we're not talking about making Europe a wild place, because you can't turn a parking lot into a wilderness. But what we *can* do is raise the relative levels of wildness, so that an area that was a one can become a two. This has really important implications for biodiversity: when you make an area that was a three into a four, or two into five, you really

change things.

**EO:** *This means Rewilding can also work in local neighborhoods, and on smaller scales?*

**SW:** Even quite small areas can be rewilded. You can make a little frog pond in the garden and distribute the

seeds of the wild flowers that the bees and butterflies like, in back gardens, or in city parks or along the highways. Soon there will be many more bees, and dragonflies and butterflies. You just have to start things off, then nature takes care of itself.

But you have to use the native species, the ones that live there naturally. That's where human management is useful, replacing the non-native with the native species.

**EO:** *And then you have connected yourself back to the wild as well.*

**SW:** And the wild contains so much beauty. I remember seeing my first truly wild forest, an untouched old-growth forest in Sweden. That was a spiritual meeting for me. Not religious, but spiritual. Suddenly I came into a forest where the trees were ten times as wide, or five times as wide as I had ever seen, and twice as tall. A bit like coming into a cathedral or temple, it demands your awe, your respect. You come in and you get humbled, you get little. And this is of course what churches are designed for, to make you humble. The forest is a cathedral that is not designed by man, but by the forest itself.

**EO:** *When you feel that humility and that awe in the presence of living nature, you let go of your dogmas and preconceptions. You open up, and you can learn directly from the wild.*

*That is a really inspiring aspect of Rewilding for me—the way it rewilds our understanding of nature. We learn more about the living networks that give the natural world resilience and vitality.*

*Take the return of wolves to Yellowstone. Until they were reintroduced,*



Exmoor ponies living in the wild in the Keent Nature Reserve in the Netherlands. The core Exmoor pony population has been kept unmixed with other breeds for at least one thousand years and is probably the most original wild horse variant in Western Europe's lowlands. This is what they looked like when man was a hunter and nobody had yet thought of domesticating them and riding on them.

*who knew that wolves would revitalize the park's entire ecology, and even reshape the course of rivers?*

**SW:** I saw another example of this on the Adriatic coast of Croatia, in the

Velebit Rewilding Area, where small cushions of spiky bushes grow, with scented flowers that are good for bees. For many years, intensive grazing by sheep and goats has been continuously creating these cushions.

I wondered which wild animals had

grazed there before the domestic ones, because the Adriatic coast has most likely looked that way for a longtime. I knew that chamois lived along that coast, all the way down from the

mountains to the sea. The chamois are only confined to the high mountain regions in Europe today because they were hunted out everywhere else. In reality, chamois can live anywhere with rocky scree, which they use to get away from wolves. There must also

have been ibex, the wild goats, but I could find no records of them in literature at the time, although they must have been there. Then the very next day I read in the local newspaper that ibex fossils had recently been found there, from the time before they were hunted out, and replaced by domestic goats!

**EO:** *When you bring wild animal species back into the landscape they once inhabited, their innate knowledge of how to live and thrive returns very quickly.*

**SW:** Rewilding Europe reintroduced some Konik horses in the mountains of Bulgaria, where there are wolves. The first year several died, because those horses had never seen a wolf before. Then they got their act together and for some years after that I don't think they lost a single one, not even a foal. They bunched together like the musk-ox, kicking

and biting, with the foals in the middle.

For millions of years, horses have banded together because of wolves. You could say that the wolf has helped design the horse as we know it, and the

*When you step into nature's temple,  
you are meeting something so much bigger  
than you, that has always been there,  
but that might not always be there,  
because of us humans.*

same with the red deer and the reindeer. They look and act as they do because of the wolf, the lynx, and the wolverine.

This is what I love about my work. I love learning things I never knew, and then communicating them to others. In China, I do this all the time. Last year, in Yunnan, I gave a visual presentation to seven hundred student teachers. When the lights came back up, I could see so many of them were crying, from the emotion of seeing all the wildlife they hadn't even known was out there, so close to their city. This happens to me in China all the time.

**EO:** *Tell me more about your work in China.*

**SW:** Our project Wild Wonders of China has carried out fifteen photographic expeditions in China so far. Over the next ten years we aim to do many more, and with visual-based communication, eventually reach two billion people, to show them the extent of the amazingly rich Chinese natural heritage. Few people realize that China has far more wilderness than Europe, more even than the U.S. Almost twenty percent of the land is in protected areas, and today all the endangered species are better protected than many in Europe.

Almost nobody realizes that China

was the first country in the world to start nature conservation. Almost two thousand years ago, under Taoist philosophy, they created a network of 157 protected areas. Some of these are enormous—twenty-thousand square kilometers, the size of whole mountain chains. Because of those areas, the panda is still with us, and the Golden Monkey has survived. Without them, we would have only their fossil remains.

**EO:** *We spoke earlier about the way the word "wild" has gained positive associations. But how do you speak about wildness in the cultural context of China? What kind of language do you use?*

**SW:** In China, there was no real word for wild. Talking about wilderness, the only word we could find meant "wasteland" and the Chinese have been finding new ones. The original name for those 157 protected areas is actually *Dong Tien*, which means "cave heavens."

**EO:** *That is such a beautiful name for a nature reserve!*

**SW:** And they were established with very strict rules. From the beginning you could not hunt, fish, or cut trees in those areas. So nature survived relatively intact in them over the millennia, through civil wars, invasions,



Staffan Widstrand in a wild Western Papua rainforest

uprisings. Most of these areas still survive today, with the majority of their species. You can identify most of the Dong Tien, the Cave Heavens, through the old scripts, and today they have become national parks or geo parks or bird reserves or Unesco sites. They have been continuously protected for almost two thousand years, and almost nobody knows this, very few even in China itself.

Of course, China has some of the worst pollution in the world as well. But the Chinese authorities are really serious now about controlling the illegal wildlife trade. And the younger generation thinks very differently: for them, the ivory and rhino horn trade is super uncool.

**EO:** *Every day I am aware of the immense challenges we face in bringing the*

*natural world through, into a more sustainable future.*

**SW:** It is a race against time. But I think if we can enable most wildlife species to survive through the next ten to twenty years, then things will open up again, because attitudes are changing, through visual communication, new ways to make a living from the natural world, such as nature-based tourism and organic farming, and simply more awareness.

When you step into nature's temple, you are meeting something so much bigger than you, that has always been there, but that might not always be there, because of us humans. That is really powerful; that's the original spirituality, and it's still there, when you strip away the layers of different beliefs, religious or not, that have separated us from nature. ♦