**Why do we visit reserves?**

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Why do we visit nature reserves? A simple question on the surface of it but one that deserves a bit more time to think deeply about. There are a whole host of reasons, some obvious and simple, others much more subtle.

On the surface, for many people, it will be to visit a place where you have a good chance of encountering a particular type of plant or animal. As a life-long naturalist if I was asked the question then this would certainly be my immediate response. This summer I travelled to a nature reserve in Gloucestershire with the sole intention of spotting some Large Blue butterflies – a species that became extinct in the UK in 1979 and which has been reintroduced and is now accessible to the public at a couple of well-publicised reserves around the country. I’m glad to report that I did, eventually, see the target species, although the views were brief and not entirely satisfying but it was a lovely reserve and I saw lots of other lovely flowers and animals as well. However, I’m already determined to head back there next year to get better views of the butterfly and, hopefully, manage to take some passable photographs of it.

There is no doubt that many of the visitors to the reserve here at Sculthorpe are keen to see some of our specialities, like the Water Voles, Otters and Kingfishers. Of course, there is a whole group of wildlife watchers who are drawn to rarities – as witnessed when the Arctic Redpoll turned up on the reserve last winter. The car park was overflowing day after day and hundreds of people headed onto the reserve to stake out the bird feeders with binoculars, telescopes and, most notably, huge amounts of camera equipment to catch a glimpse of this visitor from the far north and ‘tick’ it off their lists of birds seen. This is surely a form of collecting or hunting, a need many humans seem to have, the thrill of the chase.

So, why do we feel the need to actually see (or hear!) these scarce creatures? Surely it is good enough to know that on preserves around the world these animals and plants are thriving? For the vast majority of us, however, that is not enough. We need to see them for ourselves, and wildlife holiday firms exist solely because of this need; to service the large number of people who wish to travel to India to see Tigers in the wild, or Baja California to commune with wild Grey Whales.

Let’s return to my pilgrimage to find Large Blues (and the very word pilgrimage gives a clue). Why did I feel the need to see these flighty insects with my own eyes? As a child in 1979 I vividly remember hearing on the news (well, Newsround!) that the Large Blue butterfly had gone extinct. The thought that a native British creature could go extinct shocked me to my core and was one of the key triggers that led me on the career path I chose as a naturalist and ecologist. Although I chose to study plants and birds, I stayed up to date with all the learned science published over the intervening years to do with habitat and lifecycles of the Large Blue and was delighted when the idea of reintroduction was first put forward. To have now arrived at the point where the species has re-established and was accessible to members of the public meant I had to go to see them for myself. There was a strong emotional element to my decision, and it is this which I believe is a big part of visiting reserves and seeing wildlife.

We know that many of the people that visit Sculthorpe don’t come to see a specific animal, but rather many come to enjoy the peace, to walk in the countryside, to have chance to reflect, remember and consider things in their busy lives in a tranquil place that encourages this. Being ‘at one’ with nature is a fundamental part of being human but living in modern times disconnects us with our ancestral home and ways of life. Spending a little time in the fresh air, surrounded by the sights and sounds of a beautiful place is essential for most of us at some point in our lives.