

# Turning red meat green

Beef fed on pastures instead of grain can help to preserve our wildlife. **Clare Hargreaves** finds out how we can have our delicious meat and keep our birds and butterflies too

**M**eat is getting an increasingly bad press, blamed for global warming, despoiling the countryside and making us unhealthy. Now, though, a growing number of farmers, scientists and conservationists are hitting back, arguing that eating the right kind of meat can play a part in rescuing endangered wildlife and landscapes in the UK.

The “right” kind of meat, they believe, comes from traditional-breed animals that have been reared on unfertilised, species-rich pasture, rather than intensively reared animals fed mainly on grain. That in effect means cattle and sheep, the two meats that tend to be most demonised, as both can convert grasses and other plants (that humans can't eat) into high-nutrient protein without also needing grain, in contrast to poultry and pigs.

The problem with grain? It uses up precious land that could be used to feed humans, and it's generally grown intensively using pesticides and fertilisers that drastically reduce wildlife,

deplete soils and contribute to global warming. In the case of soya, it may well have been grown on felled rainforest in the Amazon or Congo basins.

For biodiversity, meat produced this way is a no-brainer. Take the Belted Galloway cattle at Bittleford farm near Widecombe-in-the-Moor on Dartmoor, for instance. Visit in summer and you'll spot amber and cream marsh fritillary butterflies fluttering among the cows in the moist meadows. The caterpillars of these now-rare butterflies feed on devil's-bit scabious.



The cattle eat the scabious too, but because they don't eat it to the ground, and have plenty of other things to forage, they don't damage the plants. In fact, their constant gentle grazing is crucial to preserving the farm's delicate wildlife-rich habitat, and preventing it turning to scrub.

Happily Bittleford's Belted Galloways, a hardy breed that can graze outdoors all year, also make fabulous eating. (Their meat happens to be healthier than grain-fed meat too, being higher in omega-3 fatty acids as well as in conjugated linoleic acid, a natural fatty acid.) The Galloways' flavoursome dark marbled meat is marketed by Farm Wilder, a non-profit social enterprise founded by wildlife film-maker Tim Martin to champion wildlife-friendly meat.



Martin (*inset*) works with around a dozen Devon farms and sells their meat to several butchers in the south-west and through online retailer Fresh Range. Each cut carries a label showing consumers which rare species the meat is helping to protect, from fritillary butterflies to cuckoos.

Those and other species badly need our help. The UK's *State of Nature 2019* report showed that 41 per cent of species studied had declined since 1970, with the intensification of agriculture and climate change the culprits. Butterflies were down by 17 per cent, moths by 25 per cent. Mammals also fared badly, with 26 per cent of species – including the wild cat – at risk of disappearing. Other surveys show Britain has lost 97 per cent of its wildflower meadows since the 1950s.

Martin hopes his enterprise can enable consumers to savour first-class meat and at the same time help to save disappearing species. “People are barking up the wrong tree by demonising all meat,” he says. “Meat's like electricity. Just as there's bad elec-

tricity from fossil fuels, and good electricity from renewables, so there's bad meat from intensive farming, and good meat from sustainable pasture-fed and organic farming. Another upside of pasture-fed meat is that pasture stores carbon.”

What about those who choose not to eat meat? “Personally, I'm convinced that cutting out meat altogether isn't the best thing for the planet. Instead we should be eating less, but better, more sustainable, meat. This could be meat from wild animals such as deer, which are now so numerous they need culling to protect other wildlife, or from cultivated animals like the ones we're working with,” says Martin.

“If people decide to avoid meat (and dairy) it's vital they eat organic food, otherwise they'll be supporting intensive monocultures that are virtually devoid of wildlife. Products like soya, often used as meat and dairy substitutes, may have been grown on cleared rainforest, and foods such as avocados and almonds are devastating landscapes in the US and Mexico.”

Martin's calls for us to save our wildlife by eating meat from animals that graze their habitats are echoed by bodies ranging from the RSPB to Britain's Wildlife Trusts, WWF, the National Trust, the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, the Pasture for

Life Association, Natural England and Greenpeace, as well as a growing number of farmers.

To ensure your meat is 100 per cent grass-fed, look out for the Pasture for Life logo, or ask your butcher directly, as legally beef can be labelled as “grass-fed” even if grass constitutes only 15 per cent of its feed.

Buying pasture-fed meat, argues Martin, helps both wildlife and farmers, many of whom are struggling to survive, particularly in Britain's uplands. But it won't at the low prices we've become accustomed to in recent decades. The meat of slow-growing traditional breeds may be delicious, but there's less of it than on grain-fed commercial breeds so it'll cost a little more.

As a result, most of us will need to balance our budgets by eating good quality, wildlife-friendly meat less often, almost as a treat, as previous generations did.

Martin believes we have a stark choice: to carry on eating cheap intensively produced meat and see our wildlife disappear, or to vote with our wallets by buying only pasture-fed meat. “We have to ask ourselves: do we want cheap meat or biodiversity? We can't have both.”



Products like soya may have been grown on cleared rainforest

## Eat meat, help save these species

The endangered **marsh fritillary** (top) relies on boggy meadows that are lightly grazed by cows or horses

Dartmoor's moorland edges are a stronghold for the endangered **cuckoo**

**Willow warblers** (below) have declined in southern England but still thrive on Dartmoor

The rare **small pearl-bordered fritillary** breeds on many Farm Wilder farms

**Heath spotted orchids** (above right) can be very abundant on traditional Dartmoor meadows



**Clyde Coaker at Bittleford farm with his Belted Galloway cows, fed on traditional pasture**  
OLIVER EDWARDS

Buy Farm Wilder meat through [fresh-range.com](http://fresh-range.com)  
To find other farmers visit [pastureforlife.org](http://pastureforlife.org)