

# Growing wild at Knepp Castle

A largely arable estate is reverting to a natural grazing regime. It's good for the land, good for the wildlife and good for shooting. **Elizabeth Walton** reports. Photographs by **Anya Campbell**

**O**N his family's Knepp Castle estate in West Sussex, Sir Charles Burrell Bt marched to the drum of intensive agriculture until he took a leap into the unknown in 2001 and set about wilding his land. The Knepp Wildland Project, unique in the UK, took as its blueprint the theories of renowned ecologist Frans Vera. Rejecting the popular belief that the European lowlands were once cloaked in a single, dense forest, Vera believes the landscape was half-open and parklike. Its creators were grazing and browsing herbivores such as auroch (the ancestor of domestic cattle), tarpan (the

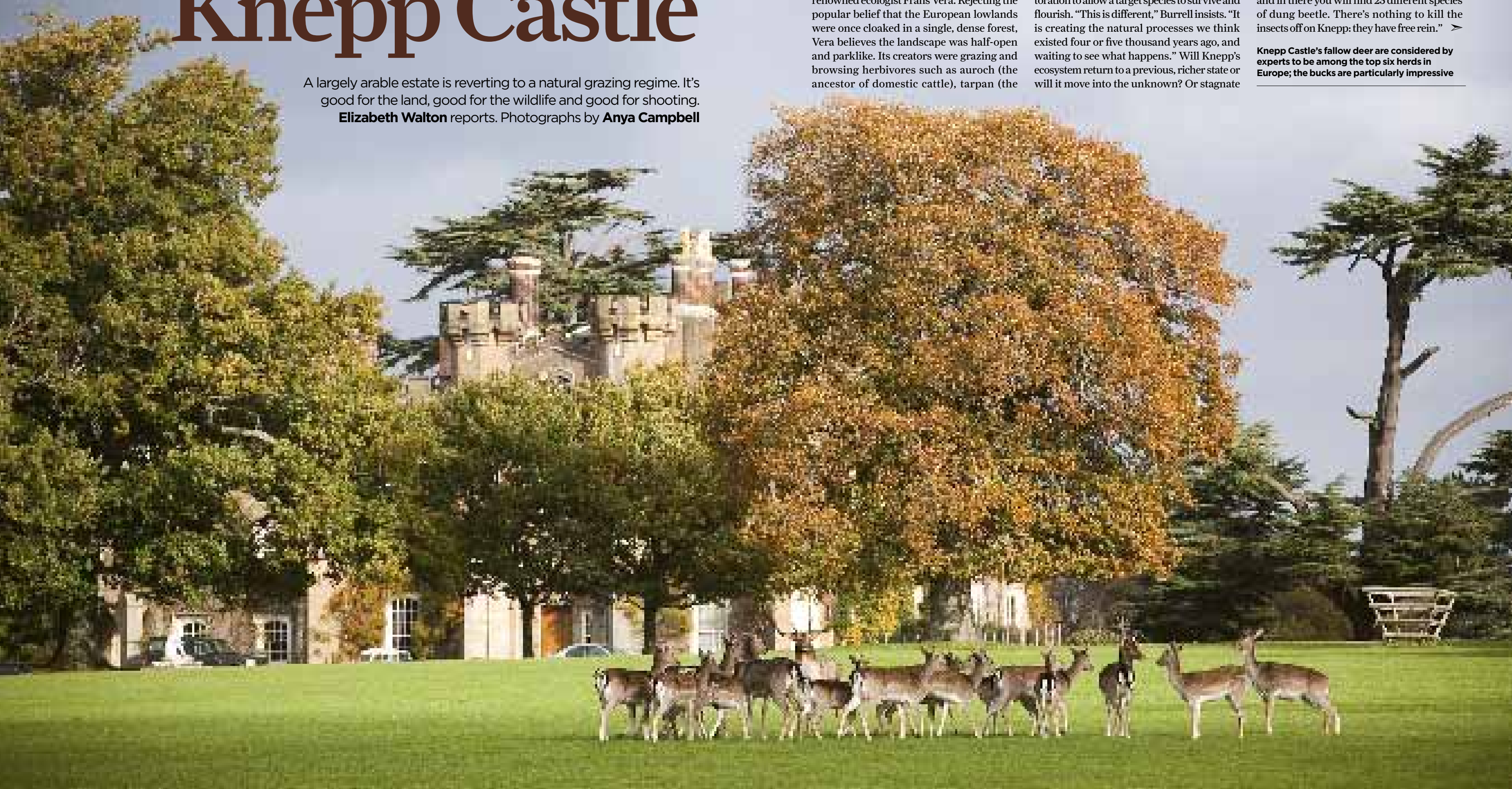
Eurasian wild horse), European elk, wild boar and red deer. The project is evolving with Exmoor ponies, Old English longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs and fallow deer. "These animals are the drivers of something – though we're not sure what that ecological 'something' is going to be," says Burrell.

Conservation usually pivots on habitat restoration to allow a target species to survive and flourish. "This is different," Burrell insists. "It is creating the natural processes we think existed four or five thousand years ago, and waiting to see what happens." Will Knepp's ecosystem return to a previous, richer state or will it move into the unknown? Or stagnate

and dwindle? "Every day brings a eureka moment," Burrell reports. "It's enormous fun."

Burrell is a true environmentalist: a man bound heart and soul to the land. "On a warm summer's day you can hear there's something good about this land," he says. "There's an actual buzzing in the ground." He kicks at a cowpat. "None of it works without the insects, and in there you will find 23 different species of dung beetle. There's nothing to kill the insects off on Knepp: they have free rein." ➤

**Knepp Castle's fallow deer are considered by experts to be among the top six herds in Europe; the bucks are particularly impressive**





**Above, left to right: Sir Charles Burrell, Knepp's owner; semi-feral Exmoor ponies; enormous anthills. Below: Old English longhorn cattle**

We're in a low-lying glade where Nature and biodiversity have the upper hand. "I took these 10 acres out of agricultural use 20 years ago and put in some scrapes for duck-flight-ing; I also moved the stream back into its old meander," says Burrell. During the intervening years, the area has transformed itself into a naturalist's paradise. "The recovery of Nature is pretty extraordinary. In my mind's eye, this is the sort of thing that in 30 or 40 years' time a lot of this land will look like – a complex mosaic of species and plants. The anthills are half a metre high. There are woodpeckers, three nightingale territories, turtle doves, woodlarks, whitethroats, blackcaps, reed warblers – and we had a bittern through here for a fortnight.

"It's thrilling," says Burrell. "Yesterday I spent a very happy evening looking for colonies of common blue butterflies, gobsmacked by the sheer quantity of these little bright-blue insects and their dusty-coloured females." The common blue's return to Knepp is indeed thrilling but it was hard cash (or the lack of it) that propelled Burrell into his experiment. He took on the estate when he was 21 and obeyed the convention that agricultural land should be farmed within an inch of its life. With a sizeable workforce, he ran a business based on 450 dairy cows, with three dairies and a factory producing ice-cream and yoghurt.

The net result of their efforts? "After 17 years we were still building an overdraft."

This was Burrell's cue to heed his naturalist's instincts. "At the beginning, the main project was to restore the park, possibly designed by Humphry Repton, around the Nash castle." Built in 1806 by the architect John

## “ THE WILDLIFE AT KNEPP PLAYS ITS MANY ROLES WITH GREAT PANACHE ”

Nash, Knepp Castle remains the family home and the original castle, a 12th-century ruin, was artfully incorporated into the parkland vista. Wilding can require intervention in the establishment phase, and a three-year process to eradicate nitrates and phosphates produced 400 acres of High Weald flowers and grasses. Deer were chosen to drive the trial procedure. "The moment they were released, it was a complete eye-opener. Instead of intensive agriculture outside the door, animals were kicking up butterflies. It was astonishing."

The Knepp Wildland Project proper now covers 2,400 acres. It grew organically in

three phases that currently exhibit three different sets of characteristics based on former cropping. The landscape-scale size increases the experiment's research value, and the professional eminence of each steering group member is testament to the project's possible implications for our future. "But the reality is that any scheme like this has to be funded in some way," says Burrell. "Ecology and biodiversity need a backbone and if we can prove an ecosystem service-type monetary value to what we're doing there is an argument that society should continue to support such experiments." A Natural England HLS agreement covers the venture's basic running costs, and the agricultural workforce has shrunk to two men. Rental income from redundant farm buildings swells the coffers.

Knepp is monitored with microscopic attention; it would occasion no surprise to learn that every red-tailed bumble-bee boasts its own grid reference, and my money says Burrell knows the number. "We have a huge amount of interest in the project," he says. "When something happens that makes the guys in the steering group sit up and take notice, their excitement rubs off on me, and that excitement gives me enough strength to carry on pushing forward." The wildlife plays its many roles with great

panache. Fallow deer flaunt their quality. "The experts say the bucks are the best in England," Burrell reports, "and also among Europe's top six herds." The longhorns look suitably historic; one bull shifts his 1,000 kilos in a heartbeat when a rival flirts with a heifer, and "wildrange" grass-fed beef delights top chefs and nutritionists alike. Another rival, exiled, loiters alone beside the River Adur that is soon to see its meanders and floodplain restored.

Tamworths rootling with their 220-kilo matriarch are beguiling, although Burrell feared the worst when they gatecrashed a wedding banquet (teepee weddings are a hit). "The bride's parents thought it was brilliant; their only concern was that the pigs might get upset stomachs from the curry starters," he says. The largest heronry in south-east England poses questions for the ornithologists. Within the lily pads, a wide circle of still-water has appeared and the herons stand in rows at its edge, presumably to fish. "And for the first time in living memory they have moved their nests from the oaks to the willows," says Burrell. Exmoor ponies are the resident comedians: "probably the most wonderful things in the whole project," he says. Why? "They're inquisitive, very intelligent and naughty as well. Just naughty. One day a stallion walked into the estate office, proud as Punch, looked at us all then walked out again."

Wilding is an emotive word; each generation redefines "natural" according to its own experience, and Burrell suspects that middle-aged members of the farming community

**Above, left to right: the River Adur, which will have its flood plain restored; the largest heronry in south-east England; perky Tamworth**

regard his endeavours as "morally reprehensible". Their elders, however, "still remember when land in this part of the Weald, marginal land, was allowed to scrub up. They remind the sceptics there was a time when farms didn't have sprays and fungicides, and this is what the land looked like. The young ones may think it's bonkers, but their minds are open."

Inevitably, dog-walkers view the estate's grazing animals as a threat and Knepp's wild-bird shoot, established seven years ago, "caused an outcry. They thought we were shooting thrushes." Game-shooting chimes perfectly with a conservation regime, and there is a centuries-long tradition of shooting on the estate. "Slowly, as a wild population of pheasants grew, we started to bring down the numbers of birds we were releasing," says Burrell. "We marked the pheasants with wing tags, so we knew what year they were put down, and if they didn't have tags they were either coming in from elsewhere or were native-born."

"The first two or three years we put down hens and cocks, then we stopped putting down hens as we were only shooting cocks. After three years, 40% of all the cocks we were shooting were home-bred. We continued the reduction, and had planned to put down none. But the dreadful winter forced us to put down 300 cock birds to make sure there was something for my friends to shoot. We shoot foxes

but, with scrubby habitat all over the fields, the birds can nest anywhere they want. Instead of walking around the edge picking off your birds in the hedgerow, suddenly it's much more difficult for the fox. And we do a little corvid control, mainly so that our lovely team of volunteer keepers can demonstrate techniques to those who want to learn.

"I have two days where 30 guns go out, split up into three or four groups for each walk-up. You form lines like the horns of a buffalo and converge on a chosen spot. So each team is walking towards a certain goal with their dogs, and you may walk for a mile to get to your flushing point, but you're seeing birds the whole time, and pushing them forward, and then you get to the agreed flushing point and they all start spilling out over that. You'll shoot 40 or 50 cock birds and half of them will be wild. We have an English partridge project – fostering on pairs we put down several years ago. Last year we had four pairs which all bred, and we had another four pairs that we fostered to: they've gained a foothold.

"Every so often you'll kick up a woodcock, a snipe or a teal. On one January day I counted 100 snipe just to my gun. I don't shoot them, but the thrill! Some people will shoot only once or twice in the day, but because everything's going on all around you, you think you've seen more action than you have. The bag is probably a hundred." Burrell chuckles: "The guests all seem to come back." A happy man mediating between the known and the unknown, the past and the future. ■

