

Five Years of Rewilding

2021-2026

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Summary

The Trust's rewilding programme began over five years ago with the purchase of **Wilder Little Duxmore** on the Isle of Wight. The further acquisition of **Wilder Nunwell** in 2022 has expanded this vision, creating more space for nature to recover.

Once intensively farmed, these sites are now being allowed to recover through rewilding—**giving nature the space and time to take the lead**. By stepping back from traditional management, the project is helping to rebuild healthier soils, cleaner water, and richer habitats, supporting nature's recovery and creating a more resilient landscape for the future.

This report highlights some of the key results recorded across our rewilding projects so far.









Various views of our rewilding sites © Aggie Iveson

Our Approach

What are we trying to achieve?

Rewilding is a process-led approach where we're trying to achieve a healthy ecosystem which contains:

- Healthy water and soils
- Species diversity and abundance
- Better-connected habitats
- Greater resilience to climate change

Ultimately, the goal is to have more nature, more natural processes and greater ecological complexity.

How can we monitor?

We therefore need to use a strategic, quantitative monitoring programme which can inform an adaptive management approach. That's where bioindicators come in.

What are bioindicators?

Bioindicators are organisms which are sensitive to changes in their environment, and therefore are quick to show changes in their numbers, diversity, composition and behaviour.

They are typically groups of species which have a range of ecological requirements, and so the more species you have, the more ecological requirements are being met. This means a landscape is more complex.

Bioindicators also require landscape connectivity, meaning that new species need a site to be well connected to the wider landscape in order to arrive there.

What can these surveys tell us?

Bioindicators can tell us a lot:

- Impacts of management
- Presence of biologically meaningful influences
- How healthy the soils are
- The landscape context of a site
- How things are changing over time



Bumblebee © Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust

How bioindicators can help us

Bioindicator groups are usually formed of a range of different species, each with slightly **different ecological requirements**. The greater the diversity of species present, the more ecological requirements are being met, indicating a **more complex** and **varied ecosystem**.

One of the main aims of rewilding is to create a **mosaic of habitats**, from woodland and scrub to tall grassland, short grassland and bare ground.

Grasshoppers and crickets are useful bioindicators because different species occupy **different parts of this habitat gradient.**



Oak bush-cricket

Found in and around woodland habitats



Dark bush-cricket

Found in scrub, hedgerows and woodland edges



Common green grasshopper

Prefers longer grass and dense vegetation



Slender groundhopper

Thrives in bare ground, short vegetation and damp, unshaded areas

Oak bush-cricket © Elly Miller; Dark bush-cricket © Tony Baggett; Common green grasshopper © Andrew Howe; Slender groundhopper © Ian Redding

Wilder Little Duxmore

Purchased by the Trust in **2020**, the acquisition of Wilder Little Duxmore formed a key step in the **Trust's Wilder Strategy**, which aims to restore nature at scale whilst creating a more connected landscape for wildlife. It is the Trust's first rewilding site, and has been going through the process of arable reversion since 2020.

Site Overview

- 42 hectares
- Rewilded since 2020
- Isle of Wight
- Ex-arable and ex-poultry fields
- Grassland, woodland and a brook
- Grazed by Exmoor ponies and cattle





Monitoring

- Comprehensive ecological monitoring
- Wildlife, habitats, soil and water
- Track recovery and inform management

Monitoring both the wildlife and environmental factors is essential in helping us understand how the site is progressing

Holly blue © Aggie Iveson; Exmoor pony © Strong Island

Wilder Nunwell

Acquired by the Trust in **2022**, Wilder Nunwell is our **second rewilding site** and has been undergoing a transition from arable farmland to a nature-rich landscape since acquisition.

Site Overview

- 142 hectares
- Rewilded since 2022
- Isle of Wight
- Ex-arable fields
- Mixture of chalky and clay soils
- Grazed by cattle and pigs



The results can also help to provide evidence for the success of rewilding and encourage others to get involved!



Monitoring

- Comprehensive ecological monitoring
- Wildlife, habitats, soil and water
- Track recovery and inform management

Bumblebee; Belted Galloways at Nunwell © Aggie Iveson

Measuring nature's recovery

119,773 Species observations

3280 Soil samples collected

654 Earthworms identified

77 Butterfly transects walked

15 Survey types





Collecting water and soil samples





Setting up a trail camera







Surveying for grasshoppers and crickets

Birds

Birds are valuable indicators of landscape-scale recovery. As highly mobile species, they help us understand how well habitats are reconnecting across the wider landscape as well as whether our rewilding sites are providing food, shelter and breeding opportunities for wildlife.

Across both rewilding sites, **75 bird species** have been recorded, reflecting the growing availability of valuable resources.

Of these species:

🟠 27 species are listed on the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 Amber List

🔴 14 species are listed on the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 Red List



Woodcock

Amber		
Black-headed gull	Meadow pipit	Snipe
Bullfinch	Mediterranean gull	Song thrush
Dartford warbler	Moorhen	Sparrowhawk
Dunnock	Peregrine falcon	Stock dove
Grey wagtail	Redwing	Wheatear
Kestrel	Reed bunting	Whitethroat
Lesser black-backed gull	Rook	Willow Warbler
Mallard	Sedge warbler	Woodpigeon
Marsh harrier	Short-eared owl	Wren

Red	
Fieldfare	Mistle thrush
Greenfinch	Skylark
Herring gull	Starling
House martin	Swift
House sparrow	Tree pipit
Linnet	Woodcock
Merlin	Yellowhammer

The presence of these species shows how important rewilding sites are as places where vulnerable wildlife can find refuge and resources

Woodcock © Serkan Mutan

Birds

Bird numbers at Wilder Little Duxmore have shown a strong and consistent increase since monitoring began. Between 2021 and 2025, **total bird counts almost tripled**, with numbers rising year-on-year across the rewilding sites.

This steady growth suggests that the site is providing increasingly suitable habitat, food sources and nesting opportunities for birds. Alongside increasing abundance, we've also seen encouraging species-level trends, with new species continuing to colonise the site and many existing species remaining stable or increasing.

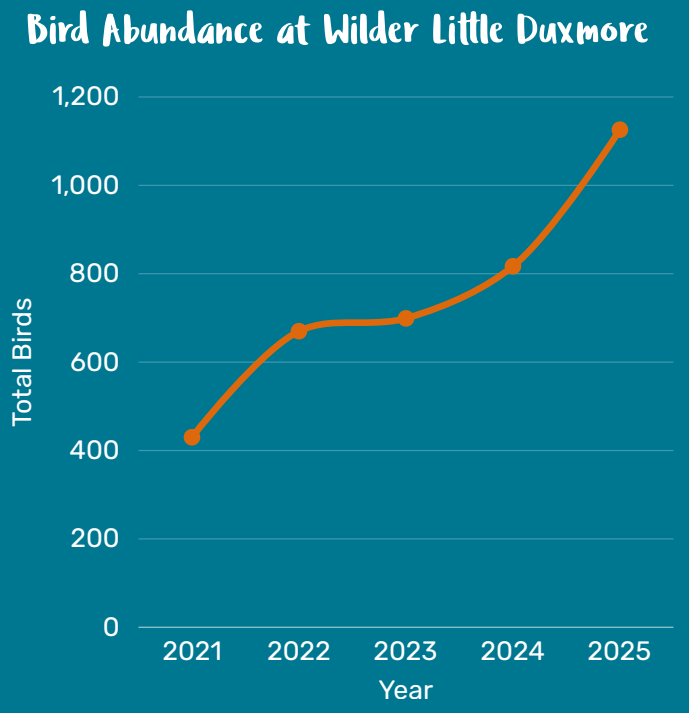


Short-eared owl

Species Trends

20 new bird species recorded since 2021

82% of species either increased in number or remained stable



Short-eared owl © Mark Bridger

Butterflies

Butterflies are sensitive to changes in habitat quality, vegetation structure and climate, making them excellent indicators of ecosystem health. Different species depend on specific plants and habitat conditions throughout their life cycle, so changes in butterfly populations can provide early signs of ecological recovery.

Since the baseline survey in 2021, we've recorded **nine new species**, and have seen a 117% increase in the number of butterflies recorded per survey at Wilder Nunwell.

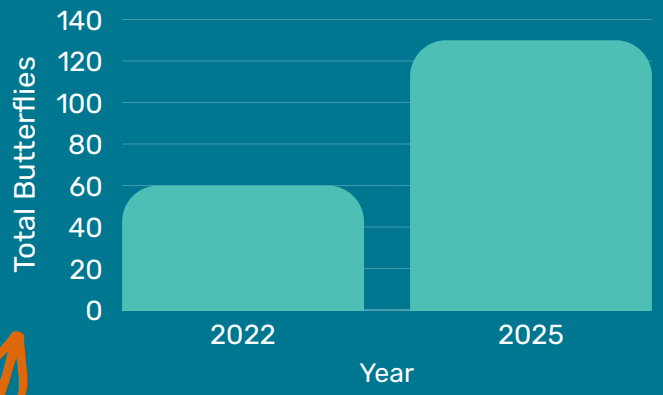
Key Results

- 27 butterfly species recorded, with 9 new species since 2021
- 117% increase in the number of butterflies recorded per survey at Wilder Nunwell
- Four Vulnerable/Endangered species listed on the Red List of Butterflies in Great Britain



Glanville fritillary © HIWWT

Butterfly Count Per Survey at Wilder Nunwell



Vulnerable	Chalkhill blue
	Small heath
Endangered	Glanville fritillary
	Wall

Moths

Moths are one of the most diverse groups of insects in the UK, with hundreds of species occupying a wide range of ecological niches. Many species depend on specific plants and habitat conditions during their life cycle, making them excellent indicators of habitat quality and diversity.

At Wilder Nunwell, both moth abundance and species diversity have increased since monitoring began in 2023. These trends suggest that the site is providing a growing variety of habitats and resources, supporting an increasingly diverse insect community.

Agapeta hamana numbers increased from 13 individuals to 239, showing the value of abundant, common plant species including thistle



Regenerating willow has created habitat for the puss moth and other willow-feeding species



Key Results from Wilder Nunwell: 2023 to 2025

- Increased abundance → Number of moths recorded per survey increased from 66 to 140
- Increased species diversity → Species count increased from 321 to 547

Agapeta hamana © Ian Redding; Wilder Nunwell © Aggie Iveson

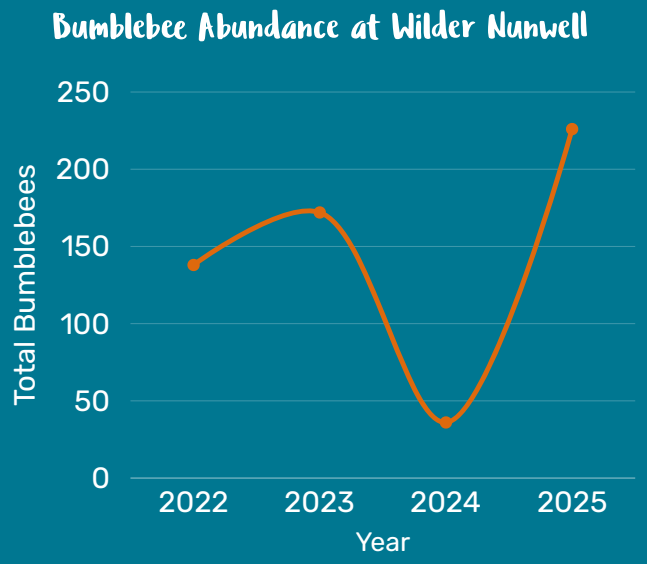
Bumblebees



Bumblebees play a vital role in pollinating flowers and crops, helping to maintain healthy ecosystems and support food production. They respond quickly to changes in habitat quality and flower availability, making them valuable indicators of how wildlife is responding to rewilding.

Although numbers fell sharply in 2024, they recovered in 2025. Such fluctuations are not uncommon and can be influenced by weather conditions, flowering success and the availability of resources throughout the season.

Across the UK, many bumblebee species have declined due to habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change and changes in land management. Restoring species-rich habitats is therefore an important way of supporting their recovery.



Key Results

- 9 bumblebee species
- 64% increase in bumblebee abundance between 2022 and 2025 at Wilder Nunwell

Despite wider pressures on bumblebee populations, there have still been some positive results at our sites.

Bumblebee © Aggie Iveson

The Soil

The foundation of an ecosystem

Importance of soil

Soils form the foundation of all terrestrial ecosystems. Without healthy soils, plant communities can struggle to establish, and landscapes can become less effective at retaining water.

We also rely on soils to produce most of the food we eat, so it's essential we look after them.



Worm in soil © Alecu Buse

How can we survey it?

There are two main approaches to surveying soil, firstly we can measure soil parameters directly, by measuring nutrient and mineral levels. This can help to flag focus areas and identify any immediate actions required, as well as being useful for comparing soils to other sites.

The second approach is to use soil bioindicators such as earthworms. Earthworm surveys can evidence the presence of biologically meaningful influences rather than just providing a snapshot in time.

Studying species diversity can tell us what kind of soil we've got, how wet it might get at different times of the year, and what conditions might be present.

Earthworms

Earthworms are incredible ecosystem engineers; they carry out a huge range of useful functions in the soil:

- Nutrient cycling
- Improving soil structure
- Bioremediation (breakdown of environmental pollutants)
- Food source for birds, mammals and amphibians
- Increasing bacterial and fungal presence in soil



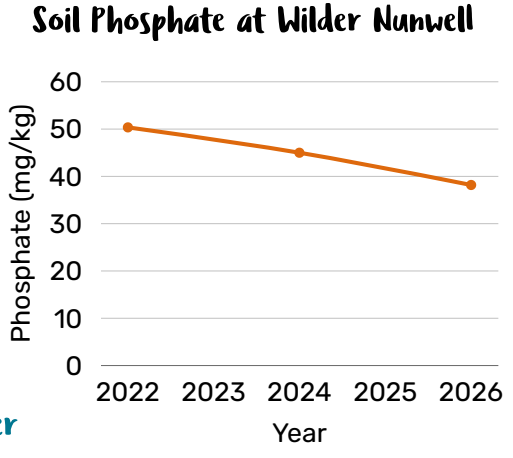
Soils without earthworms can be **90%** less effective at soaking up water

Soil Nutrients

Both Wilder Little Duxmore and Wilder Nunwell were previously managed as agricultural land and, like many former arable sites, contain elevated nutrient levels from historic fertiliser use.

While nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus are essential for plant growth, excess levels can reduce biodiversity by favouring a small number of fast-growing, competitive plants that outcompete wildflowers.

A key part of ecological recovery is the gradual reduction of these excess nutrients. As nutrient levels decline, conditions become more favourable for diverse plant communities, supporting a wider range of insects and other wildlife, as well as the natural ecological processes that underpin healthy ecosystems.



This occurs as excess nitrate from previous fertiliser use continues to slowly leach from the soil

Key Results

Soil mineral nitrogen decreased by 32.6% between 2021 and 2025 at Wilder Little Duxmore

Phosphate levels decreased by 23.5% between 2022 and 2026 at Wilder Nunwell

Lower phosphorus availability is characteristic of a more natural system, reducing nutrient-driven growth and creating opportunities for a wider range of species

Earthworms

Earthworms are a vital indicator of soil health. Unlike soil samples which provide a snapshot in time, earthworms reveal the presence of **biologically meaningful** influences, helping us understand factors such as soil structure, pollution levels and nutrient cycling.

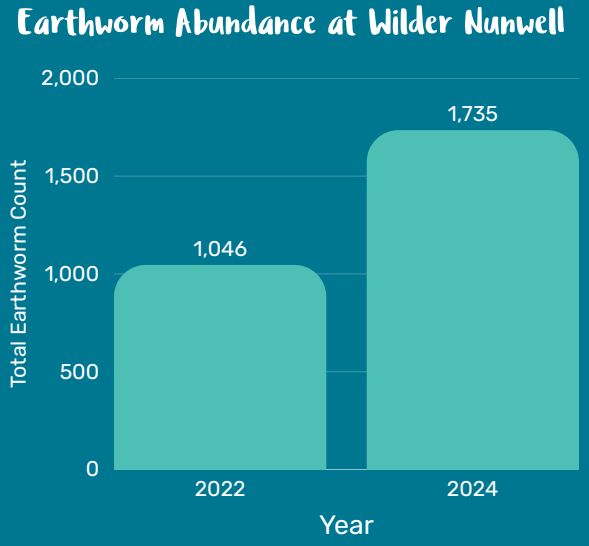
Across Wilder Little Duxmore and Wilder Nunwell, **16 earthworm species** have been recorded, with 654 adult worms identified to species level. These include species that live in leaf litter, as well as deep-burrowing earthworms that help improve soil structure and water infiltration.

At Wilder Nunwell, earthworm abundance increased by 66% between 2022 and 2024, highlighting encouraging improvements in soil health.



Earthworm sorting

Earthworm survey © Aggie Iveson



Uncommon	**Little tree worm** *Satchellius mammalis*
Rare	**Mottled worm** *Allolobophora icterica*
	Glass worm *Murchieona muldali*

Three of the species we recorded are listed as Uncommon or Rare

Dung Beetles

Dung beetles are an important group of bioindicators, they are highly sensitive to habitat quality, grazing regimes and the availability of dung. As a result, dung beetle communities can provide valuable insights into how well natural processes are functioning within a rewilding site.

Dung beetles are ecosystem engineers, by feeding on and burying dung, they help recycle nutrients, improve soil structure, increase water infiltration and provide food for other wildlife.

A healthy dung beetle population indicates that essential natural processes, from nutrient recycling to soil improvement, are becoming established across the rewilding sites.

A total of **16 dung beetle species** have been recorded across the rewilding sites:

The majority of dung beetles recorded so far belong to the Aphodiine group, with 13 species identified. This group lives and breeds directly in the dung, rapidly recycling nutrients and providing an important food source for other wildlife.

We also recorded 3 Onthophagus species. Unlike Aphodiines, these species are tunnellers, burying dung beneath the soil surface, which helps to improve nutrient cycling, soil structure and water infiltration.

Onthophagus joannae - a tunnelling species recorded at both of our sites



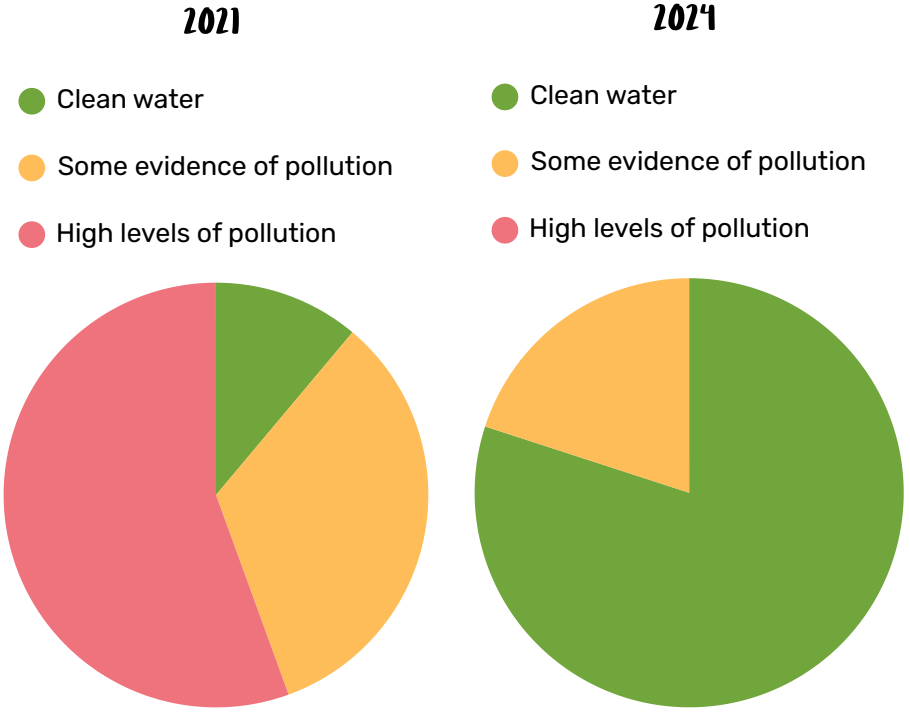
Onthophagus joannae dung beetle © Ian Redding

The Water

Very high levels of nutrient pollution in the ditches at Wilder Nunwell have been recorded regularly



The streams and ditches running through our rewilding sites still reflect the legacy of previous agricultural management. Historic fertiliser use has left elevated levels of nutrients, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, in some watercourses.



Excess nutrients can affect water quality by encouraging excessive plant and algal growth, reducing habitat quality for aquatic plants and animals.

At Wilder Little Duxmore, both nitrate and phosphate levels decreased. The decline in phosphate was particularly notable, and no instances of high phosphate pollution were recorded at all in 2024.

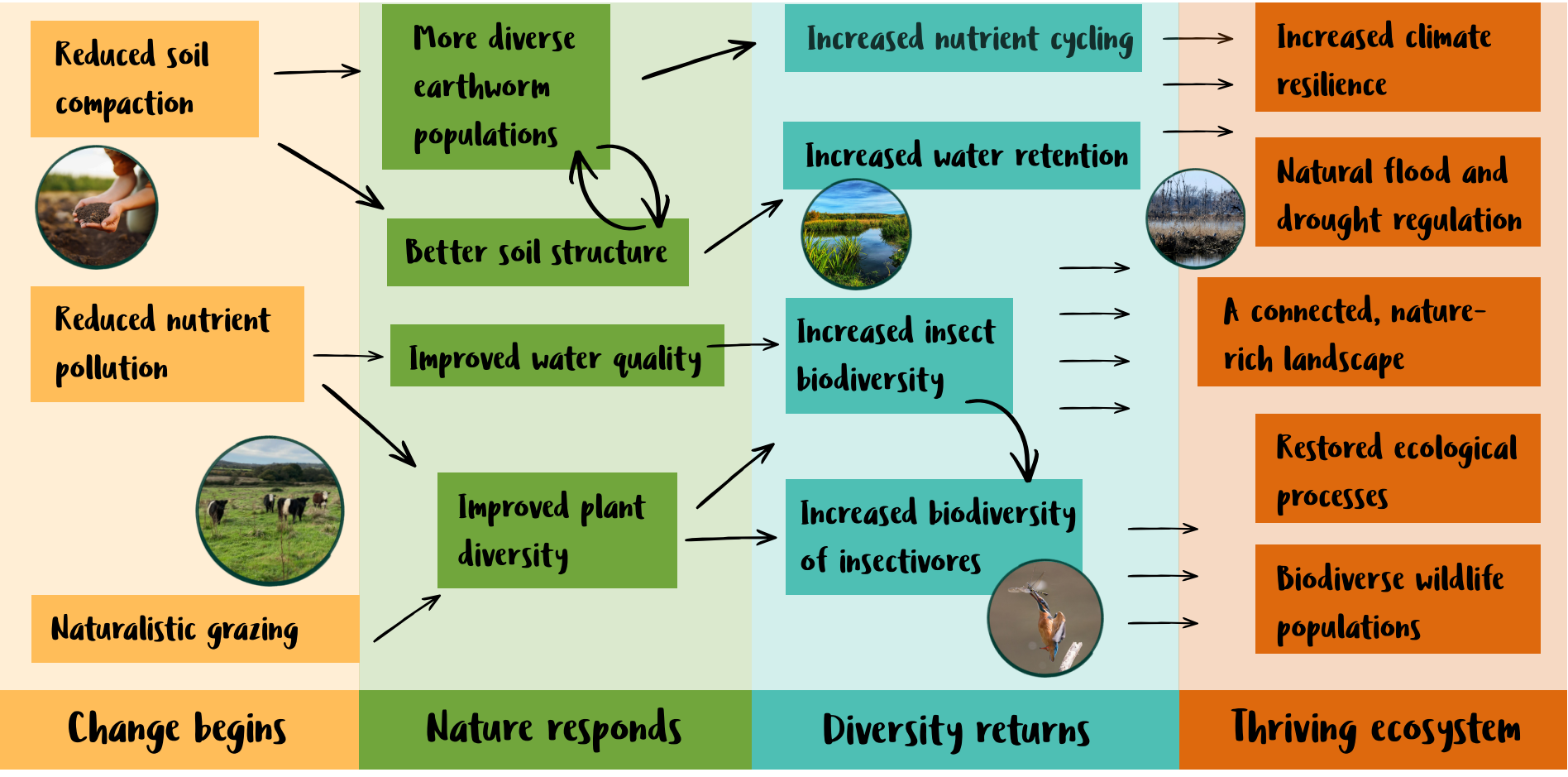
These results suggest that the site's watercourses are beginning to recover from historic nutrient inputs, supporting healthier freshwater habitats and more natural ecological processes.

The pie charts show the proportion of water tests indicating different phosphate pollution levels at Wilder Little Duxmore

Measuring water quality © David Thompson

A Landscape in Recovery...

Healthy ecosystems depend on connections between soil, water, habitats and wildlife. Rewilding helps restore these connections and the natural processes that sustain them. Five years on, we're already seeing positive change across many of the areas shown below.



Soil health © Max Balchenko; Belted Galloways © Aggie Iveson; Wetlands © Natalie Hood; Herons in wetland © Roman Biernacki

Five Years of Rewilding

Five years on, our results are beginning to reveal the impact of rewilding at both of our sites. Across multiple species groups, we are seeing encouraging signs of recovery, from **increasing bioabundance and species diversity** to the arrival of species that were previously absent.

As habitats develop, birds, butterflies, bumblebees and other wildlife are benefiting from greater availability of food, shelter and breeding habitat. Below ground, declining nutrient levels and increasing earthworm populations indicate that **soils are becoming healthier** and more biologically active.



Just a few years difference...

Key Results

- Increasing bioabundance and diversity
- Healthier soils
- Richer mosaic of habitats
- Improved water quality
- Natural processes returning

As grasslands, scrub, wetlands and woodlands continue to establish, they are creating a **richer mosaic of habitats** capable of supporting a wider range of wildlife throughout their life cycles. The presence of both common species and those of conservation concern highlights the growing value of these sites as refuges within the wider landscape.

Five years of monitoring show that nature is responding to rewilding

Towards a Wilder Future

The first five years of monitoring show that **nature is responding to rewilding.**

As habitats continue to develop, these sites are likely to support an even greater diversity of wildlife and play an increasingly important role within the wider landscape.

The benefits of rewilding extend beyond wildlife. Healthier soils can improve water retention, reduce erosion and increase resilience to extreme weather, while diverse, nature-rich landscapes provide opportunities for people to connect with nature, supporting wellbeing, recreation and a **stronger sense of place.**

Together, these findings point towards a more connected, biodiverse and resilient landscape, one that is better able to support wildlife, deliver ecosystem benefits and **adapt to future environmental challenges**. Although rewilding is a long-term journey, the results so far demonstrate the positive impact that giving nature more space can have for both people and wildlife.

The sites are already beginning to transform into thriving natural habitats, and our vision is that they will form part of a larger, well-connected landscape, **helping wildlife and people to thrive long into the future.**



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