

metfilm

WILDING

Based on the Best-selling book by Isabella Tree

Production Information:

Directed by David Allen

Produced by Gaby Bastyra

Running time: 75 minutes

Certificate: TBC

Releasing in UK & Irish cinemas June 14

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'They dared to gamble everything on the power of nature'

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Based on Isabella Tree's best-selling book by the same title, Wilding tells the story of a young couple that bets on nature for the future of their failing, four-hundred-year-old estate. The young couple battles entrenched tradition, and dares to place the fate of their farm in the hands of nature. Ripping down the fences, they set the land back to the wild and entrust its recovery to a motley mix of animals both tame and wild. It is the beginning of a grand experiment that will become one of the most significant rewilding experiments in Europe.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Based on Isabella Tree's best-selling book by the same title, Wilding tells the story of a young couple, Isabella and Charlie Tree, who in the 1980s inherit Knepp, a failing, four-hundred-year-old estate. By the end of the 1990s, facts must be faced: the farm isn't working, and they are £1.5m in debt. The land is dying, the soil reduced to sterile dirt, with plummeting biodiversity levels. Battling entrenched tradition, the couple dares to place the fate of their farm in the hands of nature, with an ambitious rewilding project inspired by the thinking of European ecologists like Frans Vera.

Ripping down the fences, and hoping to renew the growth of mycorrhizal fungi deep in the soil, they set the land back to the wild and entrust its recovery to a motley mix of animals both tame and wild. It is the beginning of a grand experiment that will become one of the most significant rewilding experiments in Europe. Over time, the soil replenishes itself – with a little help from some charming pigs – and the miraculous return of rare species like the purple emperor butterfly, white stork and turtle doves, who make their homes at Knepp. It is a transformation far in excess of anything anyone could have dreamed of, captured in intimate detail by five-time Emmy Award-winning documentarian David Allen and multi- BAFTA & Emmy Award-winning cinematographers Tim Cragg and Simon de Glanville.

Q&A with Isabella Tree

Can you put the story of the film and indeed the whole rewilding project into a nutshell – how it started, and what happened?

Charlie and I inherited the Knepp estate from his grandparents in the 1980s. And it was 3500 acres of intensive arable and dairy. Knepp was already a failing farm, business-wise, it wasn't profitable. But Charlie thought he could make it work. So for 17 years, he tried to farm it. But after 17 years, in about 1999, he realised that we were one and a half million pounds in debt, and it was just not viable. So we looked at how we could use the estate radically differently, working with the land rather than pushing against it.

What influenced the decision to try rewilding?

We were very influenced by rewilding projects kicking off in Europe, and in particular, a wonderful Dutch ecologist called Frans Vera, who has become very influential in how we recover biodiversity, how we get wildlife back onto land. And one of the key aspects of that is using large free-roaming animals as drivers of the system, so imagining all the huge herds of aurochs, tarpon, elk, boar, beavers, by the millions, which would have been in Europe before human impact, and how they would have created a much more open, diverse, dynamic matrix of habitats, which is rocket fuel for wildlife. If you want to recover nature, one of the ways to do that is to use these large free roaming animals – and modern proxies of them, if you've hunted them to extinction. You can use their domesticated descendants to drive habitat recreation. We thought it would be a really interesting experiment.

And has the experiment been a success?

We thought if we could increase biodiversity, just a little, on this land, which has been very depleted over centuries of ploughing, and over the last seventy or eighty years soaked with industrial agricultural chemicals, that would be something. And instead it has gone way beyond the expectations of any of the scientists or ecologists who were following it from the start. Within twenty years, our land has gone from being a very depleted nature-poor system to being one of the richest biodiversity hotspots in Britain with some of the rarest species. So it's a huge story of hope.

Was rewilding Charlie's decision, or did you have to convince him?

Not at all, it was entirely Charlie's baby. I was busy with a book about a living goddess in the pool at the time, so my head was really elsewhere, and I've never really had much to do with the day-to-day running of the farm. I was occasionally pulled into emergency meetings, when we had crisis meetings – and there were quite a lot of those towards the end when we had to discuss the future of the farm. But it was really Charlie's decision to stop farming. I think looking back on it, he would probably agree that he went on too long. I think when you are really invested in a business, you really want to try and make it work. I see this with people with failing businesses all the time, particularly if it's a family business.

Shutting down the farm must have been a really difficult decision to make?

When there's a culture there of generations of people who've been farming, you don't want to break that tradition, and you don't want to be the generation that's failed. Equally, Charlie had employees he was responsible for, and he didn't want to kick them out. But finally, I think, the writing was on the wall. It was a really, really hard decision. I remember the sleepless nights in the run up to those meetings in his office, where he was one by one sacking the farm employees, many of whom we knew very well. The farm manager we count as a friend, and he had two children in the local primary school. I mean, it's a hideous, hideous thing to do.

Once that tough decision had been taken and carried out, what came next?

It was incredibly liberating because suddenly you could stand back and you could see where we've been going wrong all these years. That is when you begin to start growing in a personal respect, because suddenly your imagination is free again, instead of being in a tunnel where you're worrying about if you're going to survive to the next week, the next month, or next year. Suddenly you are liberated, and you can think creatively about what you should be doing with

this estate, and perhaps what they should have been doing for generations with this estate. And then of course, came the struggle of trying to persuade other members of the family and farmers around us that what we were doing was not irresponsible, neglectful, or lazy, but that there was a reason behind it.

Was that process of persuading people difficult?

That was hard to do. But we began to see the positives for nature very, very quickly. You stopped spraying pesticides and almost instantly the following year, you get insects coming back. That was a sound that we hadn't even noticed we'd been missing as farmers. So we could see that interesting things were happening and it felt good to us. But from the outside it was, I think, difficult for people to understand that we weren't producing food anymore. People of my generation are still very much in a World War Two, "Dig for Victory" mindset, where every inch of the land should be ploughed or it's not worth its salt.

What was the tipping point in terms of the shift in public opinion?

It was only really when we began to have our headline species, our nightingales and turtledoves and purple emperor butterflies appearing, which was about five or six years into the project, that suddenly public opinion began to swing our way. People could actually start celebrating that there was something really exciting happening here. The initial few years were difficult, from the point of view of how we were perceived. The "Yours sincerely, Disgusted" letters we were getting were quite hard at times.

There's that fairly strong seam in English culture of kind of pro-environment "conservation classics" – Watership Down, Animals of Farthing Wood, Lord of the Rings, Wind in the Willows – and people have so much affection for those sorts of stories, but maybe not so much when conservation is actually happening in real life?

I'm not sure I would talk about Watership Down in terms of conservation; it's very anthropomorphic and sentimental, isn't it? It's not really nature! But yes, I think we do suffer from this mindset. We think that we're a nation of animal lovers. And yet we have witnessed and we've carried on being responsible for one of the biggest biodiversity crashes on the planet. We are one of the worst, most depleted countries, in terms of the environment and wildlife, in the world. We're twentieth from the bottom globally or something. The fact that we love our dogs and we call rabbits "bunnies" doesn't mean that we understand nature at all.

How can rewilding help shift those mindsets?

What rewilding is teaching us is a deeper respect for nature and ecosystems and how a holistic view of nature can't just survive in tiny little silos in nature reserves that are isolated. That is doomed to fail, as we've seen over the last century. We have to think in terms of landscape-scale ecosystems and living rivers. Our rivers are still continuing to decline in quality year by year. Thirty years ago or so, when we joined Europe, we were considered the dirty man of Europe, and we're even dirtier now.

There's that sense of not understanding nature itself, while at the same time thinking that we do, and thinking that we're animal lovers and we're benign stewards of the land. It's also the pushback from farming, and that mindset that we have to continue using pesticides, and

plough and pollute our rivers with slurry and run-off. And we don't have to do it that way. But that tide is also beginning to turn in terms of regenerative agriculture and farmers, some of them at least, who aren't under the sway of the agro-chemical companies. The big farming and big food and farming industry are beginning to understand that there is a much more sustainable way of producing much healthier food by not ploughing and by not using chemicals, which actually works with nature. There's a big learning curve, but it is beginning to happen.

And the film should help with that! How did the project come about?

We'd had literally about 70 or 75 approaches by independent producers, film companies, and people wanting to do a film inspired by the book, whether it was a kind of fly on the wall thing or documentary or dramatisation – there were all sorts of different approaches. We went quite far down the road with a couple of them. But we felt that ultimately either the approach was wrong, or the director really didn't understand what we were doing or what the rewilding story was about, which is really about the miracle of nature, and how nature bounces back if we have the courage to let it.

But Charlie had met David Allen a few years before, and we thought, “Well, why don't we just ask Dave what he thinks?”, because we both really respect him as a brilliant filmmaker, but also as somebody intelligent and interesting who gets that big picture and is interested in nature, as well as the characters and the story arc and all that kind of thing. So we had a call with him, and we were discussing it, and what did he think of the people who've been approaching us, and he just said, “Why don't I do it?”

What was the filming process itself like?

We started filming, safely, during lockdown. And actually, it was just the perfect, perfect timing. Dave is fantastic to work with, he's so relaxed and laid back and calm, and he gathers around him this brilliant team, who are all lovely people. So you're happy to spend time with them. The few filming things that I've done, well, it can be a nightmare, and this was just fun. It was always good fun. We trusted him to get it right, which was also important. But also we had the time and that mindset, because it was during covid, so we were home, we had the headspace, we were relaxed. It was a beautiful summer for most of the filming, so it just felt right. I think if we had to start trying to squeeze in filming in thirty or forty filming days in a year, we would have been frantic and hassled, but it was very lucky, it was beautiful timing and it was a joy.

Was it at all nerve-wracking, that idea of being portrayed, and putting a narrative on screen which necessarily must simplify aspects of real life?

Yeah, that that's difficult, isn't it? Because you have to learn to talk in shorthand, but we'd been doing a lot of that anyway for public presentations, to get across the ideas. I hope that we are clear, but also succinct. It's always nerve-wracking, talking in front of the camera, trying to get things on message and nail it, every time. But the process with Dave was easy. He gave us enough room to express ourselves, while at the same time, you know, directing. But it was bizarre seeing our younger selves, portrayed by these brilliant young actors, wandering around in our seventies and eighties clothes. That was a bit surreal. But lockdown was surreal anyway, so it just seemed to add to this weird dimension that we were in. We didn't see all of it being filmed. I mean, we didn't see the wonderful actor-pigs that came in and started tearing down

the marquee, or any of those sort of things. So that was a great surprise when we saw that footage.

Were the actor-pigs well-cast in terms of the breed and so on?

Yes, I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference.

David Allen and his team have done a really good job of capturing the sense of those miracles that happened, with the turtle doves, and the pigs diving, and the storks on the chimney and all of those moments. If you had to pick just one of those, is there one moment that really stands out for you as emblematic of what the whole project achieved?

Gosh, I don't know. I mean, they're all amazing. In a way, it was a perfect quiet time to be filming wildlife, so they got extraordinary footage of the animals. When you see that mother pig, tucking her babies in, a few days old, and going backwards and forwards with mouthfuls of leaves and moss to tuck them in, and keep them warm on a cold spring night, that is magical to me. One of the things they captured on film was when we released beavers, and I broke down in tears, because it was so moving to suddenly see a beaver leaving a cage and being free, living in Sussex, the first beaver for 400 years. That was a momentous occasion. But there's so many highlights and I've watched the film so many times now, and I'm still moved when I see the first white stork in Britain to take flight, wild born, for 600 years. It's amazing what they managed to catch.

It's fortunate that you've got those beautiful creatures to pull people in, but in a way, it's the biodiversity under the earth, in the soil, that's the heart of the story – and luckily the filmmakers have found a really good way of dramatising something you can't literally shoot.

Oh, that was genius. I think I described it as a kind of electrical circuit board that happens underneath the ground, and I'm so passionate about it. They got a wonderful animation team but it's a tricky thing, putting an animated sequence into a live action film. They've done it absolutely brilliantly, you really feel you're getting a sense of the messages that mycorrhizal fungi are sending between plants. It's a brilliant visual that brings that to life that universe beneath our feet that we just don't see.

It feels like one of the problems conservation efforts face is that people are happy to give money to tigers, but not to insects – there's that kind of need to be cute?

Yeah, that's it. That's why the charismatic species like storks are so important because they appeal to us. They speak to us as human beings – there's something very quirky and anthropocentric about them, and we become very familiar with them. And yet they eat insects, so what you're doing when you start supporting storks, is making sure that there's a landscape out there that provides them with the food, which is insects, largely. So you may not be able to raise so much money for a dragonfly or a dung beetle. But if you're supporting the stork, or if you're supporting a tiger, essentially it's an umbrella species for a whole suite of other species.

I think David's shown that so brilliantly, in telling the stories of how those trophic cascades work. How one species affects another – a pig rooting creates the ground where plants sprout, which become food for the purple emperor butterfly. No species exists in isolation, including our own, and we are all connected. That mycorrhizal network underground is actually a metaphor for nature itself, the whole of nature on this planet. You start breaking it, and then we all start becoming dysfunctional. I think that's really the power of this film: seeing how those fizzing connections happen. And how quickly they'll come back, if we let them.

Q&A with director David Allen

Tell us about first reading Isabella Tree's best-selling book, *Wilding* – did it immediately spark mental images of how you could go about filming it?

Making films about our relationship with the wild, combining natural history with human drama, is what I have spent a lifetime trying to achieve. And it's very rare to find such a compelling and dramatic story with uplifting conclusions which can really change the way we feel about the wild, so to find this archetypal narrative with two young protagonists, battling against the odds to discover something that can help restore this damaged world – this felt like something really special.

The privilege of it all was often broached as a problem for a modern audience, but I felt there was also something compelling here, asking why such a grand experiment was left to them – why was this not happening anywhere else? Why were our institutions not daring to take this leap and see what happened? So, through this position of extreme privilege, seeing how a young couple dare to take on the establishment and dream up this grand experiment to discover a new way of looking at the world – this instantly struck me as a wonderfully cinematic story.

In the book what Issy is also so good at is blending this dramatic narrative with an evolving argument fuelled by hard-fought, well-researched science fact. So you get this wonderful trajectory of data showing a creeping understanding about the levels of destruction we have inflicted on the biodiversity all around us, combined with WTF moments of demonstrable transformation showing a way to reverse that terrible trend.

What were the major challenges of making this film?

The challenges in bringing this to life were considerable. First up, it is a narrative that happens in the past, a twenty year story with plenty of scientific data demonstrating the baseline of where they started, and the miraculous explosion of biodiversity they have witnessed – but with next-to-no visual references to this backstory. So bringing that transformation of the land to life as a climax was extremely challenging, because the conclusions of this film are breathtakingly important, and yet the changes are creeping and often hidden from sight. The real denouement is all about worms and organic matter in the soil and the movement of animals across thorny lands – do not present an obvious visual climax with an emotional arc. So in many ways we experienced some of the same problems Issy and Charlie faced: how do

you make people fall in love with a rag-tag bunch of domesticated animals and see a tangle of thorny vegetation with new eyes?

There's some incredible footage in the film – which aspects or sequences make you most proud, looking back?

I am proud that we were able to be there for such a comprehensive look at this place. We could film the nightingales demonstrating the largest concentrations of song birds in the country – and follow a breeding turtle dove, the next most likely bird species to face extinction on British soil. We captured the pigs and cows on their journey to become a little bit closer to the wild. We were there when the first beavers were finally given a legal release, for the first time in Sussex for 400 years. We followed as the first white stork raised in the wild in England for 600 years took flight – we literally had a drone flying beside this young bird's tree as she soared from the nest.

To be able weave these extraordinary natural history events within our recreation of Charlie and Issy's twenty-year drama... this was a formidable achievement, only made possible because of the huge investment from our team of talented filmmakers.

The score is by Biggi Hilmars and Jon Hopkins, which is a coup – how did you get them involved?

Biggi's music is provocative and immersive. He comes from Iceland and I think his scores have an epic landscape quality to them, probably born out of such an evocative homeland. Jon Hopkins is someone I have wanted to work with for many years. He builds scenes with an extraordinary mixture of sounds and has collaborated with some of my favourite musicians including Brian Eno, Coldplay and King Kreosote. But he is an elusive character, and I snagged him into this job, through the simple serendipity that his brother was a huge fan of the Knepp project, and this enthusiasm convinced Jon to work with us on the Wilding score. There are not many people on the planet who can provide this kind of evocative modern soundtrack to the magic of rewilding.

What was it like working with Isabella and Charlie?

Like the world they have cultivated, Issy and Charlie have grown in complexity from the days they first inherited the failing estate. I think they started this with an almost child-like sense of enthusiasm and wonder, but each of them has grown into world experts on the possibilities of what rewilding can do for the lost and forgotten places of our world. And this was no small intrusion into their lives – we spent years filming at Knepp, weeks of filming inside their home, and they remained extraordinarily good-natured hosts. That child-like enthusiasm for the place and their animal cohorts shone through, throughout. Recreating someone's life like this holds considerable responsibilities for a filmmaker. I can only imagine how difficult it was to watch us traipsing around their world with our two young actors playing young Issy and young Charlie.

And what was it like working with the animals?

Working on the story of our domesticated animals and their journey from tame to wild was a revelation for our cinematographer Simon De Glanville. Simon has worked all over the world filming some of the most spectacular animal events on the planet, and like Issy and Charlie, Simon could find a childlike delight in tracking such humble creatures as they re-discover their wildness, in a landscape so close to home. Filming the tame sow tucking in her young piglets with a duvet of leaves was a particularly important moment for us both. It was filmed on one of our very first filming trips at Knepp, and to see see such an intimate moment of animal drama with such a humble creature had a dramatic effect on both of us – seeing this intimate moment that speaks to such a larger thesis about the possibilities of how we look at the domestic animals around us.

There are some very fine pig actors who look like they're taking quite a Method approach to their performances...

We did have a few actor animals for a few key scenes. There was a very game Exmoor Pony brought into play Duncan the wayward horse who caused havoc at the polo matches. And a couple of genius actor pigs, who managed to make their mark scoffing the canapés in the marquees and eating seaweed on the local beach.

What do you hope people take from the film?

Much of this story is about the creeping baselines of change that have happened over generations all around us but just slow enough for us not to notice the loss we have all experienced. If this film can reawaken our sensitivity to and understanding of that loss, and help us realise that (for areas not fit for industrialised agriculture), there is another way, that we can re-discover a rich landscape full of wildlife we thought we had lost for ever, that would be a wonderful thing for people to take away from this film. Look around you, think outside of the box – is this sustainable? Is this the way it has to be? Or is there another way to repair what we have lost and let nature look after the countryside for us? As nature-lover Derek Gow says in the film, they'll do it for free.

WILDING's MULTI AWARD-WINNING TEAM

Wilding is produced by three-time Oscar-winning production company **Passion Pictures**; partnered with Oscar-nominated and **Emmy and Peabody Award-winning HHMI Tangled Bank Studios** whose most recent film **All That Breathes** won best documentary at Sundance, Cannes and the London Film Festival. This is the third film produced by these two studios, following the Emmy Award-winning film **The Serengeti Rules** (2018), and the Emmy-nominated documentary **My Garden of a Thousand Bees** (2021), which won the Golden Panda Award at Wildscreen.

The film is directed by five-time *Emmy* Award-winning **David Allen**, and photographed by multi- BAFTA & *Emmy* Award-winning cinematographers **Tim Cragg** and **Simon de Glanville**

Wildling's musical score, is composed by **Biggi Hilmars** and Grammy-nominated **Jon Hopkins**, cited by *The New Yorker* as “one of the most celebrated electronic musicians of his generation.”

BIOS

DIRECTOR – DAVID ALLEN

At **Passion Planet**, **David Allen** masterminds an award-winning film department focusing on natural history and factual output across both television and theatrical release documentaries. With five Emmys and twelve Wildscreen Pandas to his name, David is recognised as one of the leading independent producer/directors in his field. His production for BBC, ***My Life as a Turkey***, was described by *The Times*, “as probably the best documentary of the year” and won Wildscreen’s coveted “Best of Festival” Golden Panda. More recent productions include landmark conservation series such as ***Earth: A New Wild*** & ***H2O: The Molecule that Made Us***. Recently David produced the *Emmy* Award-winning feature documentary ***The Serengeti Rules*** and a lock down authored film ***My Garden of a Thousand Bees***, which opened the 40th anniversary year of the PBS series *Nature* and won David his second Golden Panda at Wildscreen.

PRODUCER – GABY BASTYRA

Gaby is a London-based nature history producer at **Passion Planet**. Working with **David Allen**, she has produced numerous award-winning films and helps curate **Passion's** impressive slate of productions from land-mark series like ***Earth: A New Wild*** to the conservation VR experience ***My Africa***. Previously as Head of Development for **Talesmith Productions**, she was the executive producer for ***Takaya: Lone Wolf***, which won the coveted Canadian Screen Award for Best Nature Film. Ever since winning the Best Newcomer Award at Wildscreen in 2008 Gaby has continued to push at the envelope of what is possible in natural history and science programming, enabling unlikely productions from the Golden Panda Award-winning ***My Garden of a Thousand Bees*** to a series of short comedy conservation films titled ***Animals in Therapy***.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER – SEAN B. CARROLL

As Head of Studio, **Sean B. Carroll** directs **HHMI Tangled Bank Studios'** mission, strategy, and editorial focus, and oversees both the documentary and dramatic film slates. An internationally recognized biologist, award-winning author, and *Emmy* Award-winning executive producer, **Carroll** is the architect of **HHMI's** filmmaking initiative to bring great stories about science and nature to broad audiences. The studio's recent film, ***All That Breathes***, was the first to win best documentary at **Sundance**, **Cannes** and **London**, and went on to earn

an Academy Award nomination. Other notable films include Emmy-nominated ***My Garden of a Thousand Bees***, which won the top award at Wildscreen, and Emmy Award-winning films ***The Farthest*** and ***The Serengeti Rules***, the latter of which was based on Carroll's book of the same title. He is currently co-executive producing ***Wild Hope***, a series that spotlights changemakers around the world who are addressing the challenges of biodiversity loss.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER – DAVID GUY ELISCO

David Guy Elisco manages the development and production of a portfolio of films for HHMI Tangled Bank Studios, focusing on feature-length documentaries. In his work, he is drawn to dramatic stories that touch the heart, inspire wonder, and provide insight into life on Earth. Most recently, Elisco served as executive producer on the Oscar-nominated film ***All That Breathes***, the most awarded documentary of 2022, picking up the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and the L'Oeil d'Or Award for Best Documentary at the Cannes Film Festival among its many honors. Elisco's recent work also includes the Peabody Award-winning film ***Inventing Tomorrow***, the Emmy-winning ***The Serengeti Rules***, the Golden Panda and Kavli winner, ***My Garden of a Thousand Bees***, and the critically acclaimed ***Oliver Sacks: His Own Life***. He's currently working on ***Super Bugs***, which is being produced by Amos Pictures, for HBO and the BBC.