

Chapter 7

Saturday dawned bright and a little milder than it had been. Dan was pleased. It would make the day's work easier and more pleasant for the group. Today was the day for the reinforcement. It had to be today. That was the rule of the licence. He gathered together all of the equipment he needed and put it into the van. He ran his eye over it again and checked off everything in his mind.

Jumping into the van, he pulled out of his drive and headed up towards Fell Farm. On his arrival, he saw Farmer Green chatting to a man beside the barn. As he drove closer, he recognised one of the reserves officers from Durham Wildlife Trust. He had a young boy of 10 with him. Dan knew that this was Ben, Chris's nephew. He went everywhere with Chris, whenever he could. "Hello mate," he called, as he jumped from the van.



<http://www.durhamwt.co.uk/>

The Trust man, Chris, gave him a wave. "Just 'chewing the fat' with Farmer Green about the state of farming today."

"Yeah," replied Dan. "It could certainly be better in some places, but I guess we could probably do more to encourage better farming methods if we thought about it."

"Did you know that 75% of this country is farmland. That's a big slice as far as wildlife is concerned." The two other men nodded gravely.

"One of the problems," continued Chris, "is that on non-organic farms, too many chemicals are often used to try to control pests, weeds and diseases. Some farmers feed their animals antibiotics when they are well, just to try to avoid disease. This often means that the animals build up immunity to them. Then they don't work anymore, and we need to find stronger ones!"

The old farmer shook his head and tutted. "Not on my farm!" he declared. "And I've been reading a bit about these GM crops. They reckon that the pests on corn have developed a resistance to the crop, making them into 'superbugs'! That'll make 'em even harder to get rid of!"



Chris nodded. "No matter what we do, nature always seems to get one over on us. We could end up making the problems worse by our interfering."

"I've noticed a big drop in some of the important vegetation over the years," Dan observed.

"Yeah," replied Chris. "Do you know that we've lost over 45% of our natural hedges since the last war? Over 98% of our hay meadows – so vital for wildflowers – have also gone! Over 75% of our heather moorlands are looking bad, and that's the result of over-grazing."

The farmer glared at him. "Not on my farm!" he spat.

"No, I wish there more like you, Mr Green," the Trust man admitted. "You still have your farm ponds. Thousands have been drained and lost over the years. Ponds are one of the best things for wildlife. I just wish more people would build them in their gardens."

"As long as they look it up and do it properly, of course," put in Dan.

Chris nodded. "The Wildlife Trusts are working hard to help farmers create systems to encourage wildlife. And we can all help.

- If people supported their local Wildlife Trust, we'd have much more money to spend on projects.
- People could write to their local council and their MP. They always listen to what people think.
- We could choose organic produce and support local shops and farmers' markets.
- Children could ask their schools to organise links with the Wildlife Trust and local farms, so that they can learn more about how their food is produced.

The men all agreed. As they stood there, more cars pulled into the farm and Badger Group members began to spill out, carrying spades, picks, shovels and all sorts of other equipment. A flat-bed truck arrived with weldmesh and bags of cement. "The troops are arriving," said Dan, smiling.



"I'd like to stick around and help, if you don't mind," said Chris.

"Be my guest!" said Dan. "Many hands make light work!"



<http://www.thomas-graham.co.uk>

Meanwhile, in the wood, the two RSPCA Special Operations men were busily setting up camp. They'd checked out of their hotels, driving away as if they were heading home. This would be home from now on.

They were setting up camp in a thicket, where no one would be likely to spot them. The thicket was also in the ideal spot for the camp. It wasn't too far up the hill to be caught in the wind, but not too far down in the valley; warm air rises, so the valley bottom would be the coldest, and probably the wettest. There were no bees' nests or dead branches hanging over them, which could fall if the wind rose. They were also far enough away for their presence not to bother the badgers too much, but so that they could still see the setts. Luckily, the thicket seemed to have been used as a lying-up place for roe deer, so the ground vegetation was nicely flattened for them. There was also what looked like a day-bed, perhaps used by a badger or fox, beneath one of the bushes.

They set about building their shelter. First they collected straight dead sticks, of different thicknesses, and leaves and other debris. Then they began with the thickest branches, which they leant against an old tree trunk. It was important to lay them at about 45°, so that the rain would run off. These were the main support. They filled in the gaps with thinner twigs, leaving a gap for the entrance away from the prevailing wind for warmth.



Once they had finished that, they collected handfuls of leaves and debris from the woodland floor. They piled these on to a thickness of about 30cm, as anything less would not retain warmth.

Bottles of water, swathed with camouflage tape, were stored under a bush, out of the sun that streamed through the canopy at certain times of the day. Also, there were bottles of glucose high-energy drinks, Food was stored in green animal-proof containers – animals never miss a trick for a free meal! They'd been careful to choose the sort of things they'd take. There were packs of chocolate – always a favourite, and it has a high energy value. There were bags of mixed nuts and seeds, which they knew would also give them

lots of energy. The rest of the larder was made up of packs of light meals, which were easy to make and were filling for the two men. They also had some equipment that would allow them to live off the land.

The ground beneath the shelter was covered with a waterproof sheet, and two camouflaged sleeping bags lay on top. When living rough, you need to get comfort wherever you can! It is always important, the men had learnt, to choose the right sleeping bag for the job! It can't warm you up; it relies upon *your* heat to keep you warm. You become the 'stove' at around 37°C. If the bag is poor, the heat will leak out through the fabric and zips. It is always best, they knew, to climb into the bag whilst they were dry and fed. They would even exercise a bit before bedtime, to help warm their bodies.

The sleeping bags could also be slipped inside a couple of camouflaged army surplus bivy bags. These are waterproof and windproof bags for extra protection from the elements. Their thick fleece jackets would make great duvets inside the bags! All in all, they'd be pretty cosy in their camp!

They'd also gathered dry sticks to make a fire, to save on fuel. This could be a long job, and it was best if they could live off the land a little.

As they were preparing, they could hear the Badger Group gang heading towards them, carrying their loads for the day's work. The group assembled in the little clearing, glad to rid themselves of the weight.

"No sign of the RSPCA guys," Dan commented. They looked around them, but could see no sign of the two agents. "I thought they said they'd be here."

Suddenly, and as if from nowhere, two figures rose from the ground only a few metres away. "That's incredible!" gasped the Wildlife Trust officer. The two agents smiled and joined the group. Jobs were allotted and the group soon got to work.

Ben approached the two agents and stared at them. "Are you really secret agents?" he asked. The two RSPCA men chuckled to themselves, but kept straight faces.

"Oh, yes," said Will. "We're special agents all right." The boy's eyes opened wider. You could almost hear him thinking.

"I'd like to be like you and Uncle Chris, when I'm old enough," he announced.

"So, go for it!" encouraged Jason. "It's amazing what we can do if we really want to."

Chris sauntered over to them. "Got you talking 'wildlife' has he?" he grinned. "Once you get him going, he'll chat all day."

"He was telling us what he wants to do when he leaves school," replied Jason.

"I've just come back into the wood," Chris told the boy. "There's a kestrel hunting at the edge of the field."

"Great!" said Ben. Then he stopped and knitted his brows. "Kestrel," he said. "Is that a 'kicking k or a curly c, Uncle Chris?" he asked. The two SOU men glanced at each other.

"It's a kicking k," his uncle replied. Right, here's your first job," Chris continued. "Bring all the tools across and put them over there," he indicated. Ben nodded and went to do his task. "He's a good lad," Chris said. "He has some problems at school. He struggles with some things, but he never stops trying."

"All the world loves a trier!" Will said. "I've got a lot of time for kids like him."

Chris nodded. "He'll talk you to death, mind!" he grinned. The group then got down to their task of reinforcing the sett.



First, the thin turf and ground cover was gently removed and stacked on plastic sheets. It was important to stack it grass-to-grass and soil-to-soil, as the plants survive better.

Once the area above the chambers was de-turfed, the group began to take off around 30cm of topsoil. They thought about the badgers below, and wondered what they thought about the proceedings. They probably weren't amused, and might not emerge tonight, as the place would be covered with human scent for around 24 hours!



<http://www.prwireworkers.co.uk>



Finally, the group decided that they had removed enough soil and they flattened the surface. The next job was to lay a layer of steel weldmesh into the hole. Weldmesh is used to make concrete stronger, but it had another purpose for the Badger Group. When diggers came to hunt the badgers, they would send down into the sett, a dog with a radio collar. When it found a badger, it would hold it at bay. The radio signal would be picked up by a receiver of the surface, and the criminals would know just where to dig. Sadly, for them, the weldmesh scrambles the signal, so they've no idea where the dog really is!



On top of the weldmesh, the group laid sand, cement and gravel, which they mixed with their spades. The next job was to carry water in large buckets from the stream. This was gently and carefully mixed with the concrete.

The group were glad to sit down for a while to eat their packed lunch whilst the concrete set. There was much talk of where and when the next dig would take place, and worried faces showed how seriously the group took the problem.

Ben joined the group. He'd worked very hard to help during the morning. He placed himself between Jason and Will. "Did you know," he asked, "that we have 80% of our black grouse in the North Pennines? The black grouse, or *blackcock*, is larger and rarer than the red grouse. You can see them in an advert for booze at Christmas."



The RSPCA agents stopped in mid-chew. They looked at each other and then back at the boy.

"It's an amazing bird! I've seen them," he said, proudly. "They have glossy black plumage and bright red wattles, like eyebrows, above their eyes. The females are dull, of course," he continued. "Uncle Chris says that's an important adaptation for blending into the background on the nest."

"But nothing beats watching the spring 'lek' of the males. You should see it! The males raise and fan out their big tails, so you can see the lovely white feathers underneath. And the noise! You should hear it! It's strange - a sort of rasping and burbling noise. They make it when they strut their stuff! Then they rush around to say, "I'm the king of the castle!"

The SOU men were speechless! This was the lad who wasn't very good at school! He was incredible. He obviously loved his wildlife, and had done everything he could to learn as much as he could about it. Chris had been watching the conversation from the other side of the circle of workers. "Told you he'd talk you to death," he laughed. Ben looked embarrassed.

"No problem," said Will. "Ben, I could chat to you all day."

"Ben," Jason asked. "Do you know anything about red squirrels?" The boy's eyes brightened again. He nodded his head. "I promised myself that I'd try to learn more about them when I was in the Dales," Jason told him.

"Well," said Ben. Our Dales are one of the last places in Britain for the red squirrel. They've been pushed out from a lot of their territory by the grey squirrels. Of course, it's not the grey's fault. It's just another of our messy introductions. People brought them in because they 'looked cute'! But grey squirrels have an illness called parapox. If they get it, it's a bit like when we get the flu. If a red gets it, it's dead!"



"Where could I see one?" Jason asked the boy.

"Have a look on the squirrels website." Ben replied. "I've got the address in my book."

<http://northernredsquirrels.org.uk/homepage.htm>

"Thanks mate. I will," Jason said.

"Is that concrete dry yet, Ben?" Chris asked. Ben leapt up and grabbed a stick. "Thanks for chatting to him," Chris said to Jason and Will. "He'll talk about this for ages. The time he sat in the wood and talked to two 'secret agents'."

"It's been a pleasure," replied Will. "He's an amazing kid."

Chris smiled. "Yeah, I think he is. He's not as good as most at school, but he never stops trying. He's learnt so much about wildlife. He sometimes tells me stuff. I reckon he'll make a great reserves officer in years to come."

"He's a walking encyclopaedia on the environment," commented Jason. "It's amazing what you can do when you really go for it."

After a short while, Ben came back having given the concrete a poke with a stick. It showed the group that the concrete was hard enough to begin backfilling with soil. This took a while, and then the turf was gently replaced. Dan noted that, whenever you did this sort of work, the turf never seemed to quite fit the hole! Finally, twigs, branches and leaves were scattered around and the group stood to admire their handy-work.

"The diggers are in for a nasty shock, if they come to dig this sett," Jason chuckled.

"What a shame!!" giggled one of the Badger Group girls.

"Later in the year, I might come up and plant a few small bushes over the top of the sett too. Once their roots get in, that makes the place much harder to dig too," said Dan.

"Good idea," they all agreed. "Everything we can do helps."



Once they were satisfied with their handy-work, the group cleared up, and the two SOU agents began preparations for their first night in the wilds. Ben suddenly appeared at their side. "I've just been carrying stuff to the cars," he told them. "There's a redshank standing on the wall. It's calling. It probably thinks there's a danger - it's probably not very happy with us. It's a very shy bird, you know. But even shyer birds are the snipe that live here. I like their striped plumage and they have a real wader's beak. They like to nest up in the dense growth, and they only come out if they are disturbed. Sometimes, a dog, off its lead on a walk, sets them up. In the breeding season, though, you can see them displaying over the fields; flying up and plunging down. Their tail feathers vibrate to make a weird humming noise. We call it 'drumming'".

The two men just looked at each other. How could a young lad like Ben know so much about the world around him? It was incredible!

Ben suddenly looked worried. "Can I come and see you again?" he asked.

"Ben mate," said Will, "you are welcome any time. Just ask your Uncle Chris if it's ok."

Ben grinned from ear to ear. "See you," he called over his shoulder, as he followed the Badger Group out of the wood.

