

# Feeling the buzz: in thrall to nature and the pursuit of honey

When **Roger Morgan-Grenville** started beekeeping it was a midlife challenge and a bit of fun that soon became a magnificent obsession that has changed everything

In life, things are very rarely as good, or as bad, as their public version suggests. But all over Britain, in the last 50 years, flying insects have taken such a dreadful pounding that it is hard to exaggerate how far their numbers have fallen. The short answer is probably by 75 per cent. The long answer is more complicated.

For honeybees, and the other larger pollinators, this is based on a cocktail of causes, chief among which are changing land use and the careless use of chemical herbicides and pesticides. Although depressing in itself, this situation is a necessary starting point for any happy – and this story is a happy one – account of modern conservation.

My adventure into beekeeping, and through beekeeping, into writing the book, *Liquid Gold*, was jump-started by reading a paper on the insect crisis, and having an unusual attack of the ‘if not me, then who?’ sentiments straight afterwards. Generally humans like a challenge, and mine came earlier than I had expected with the offer of a run down and broken old hive one wet afternoon the following weekend, from a friend who

had given up the hobby a decade before.

“You’ll be useless at it,” he said cheerfully, as he helped load it into the boot of my car, and, for a while, he was absolutely right. But having managed to kill off my first swarm within three hours of taking it, I teamed up with a friend down the road and gradually, sting by sting, swarm by swarm, beer by beer, we improved until, at the end of our first season we had seven pots of honey to show for our £950 of investment. The second season we reached about 60 pots (and last place in the Petersfield Beekeeping Association honey show) and after that, we were flying.

My bees live 500 miles to the south, by the way, but we look northwards with jealous eyes. Scotland, which has about 2500 beekeepers and 25 commercial honey farms, also happens to have the crown jewels of nectar – heather. Heather honey has a taste and bouquet all of its own, and it can command the best price of any honey made in Britain. Sixty per cent of Europe’s heather moorlands are in this one country, and it is why so many Scottish apiarists will take their hives up to a local

moor towards the end of the summer, so that the foragers in each colony can gorge themselves on the nectar from the tiny bell-shaped flower of *Calluna Vulgaris*. After all, left to its own devices a bee will only forage out as far as three miles and very few will live close enough to the moors to get a bit of the action. (Actually, it gets even better: ling heather honey is quite gel-like, and hard to extract, meaning that many beekeepers will produce it as comb).

Living, researching and writing *Liquid Gold* did three very specific things for me, which is why I have become something of an advocate for others to take it up in their ‘middle years’.

First, it has been (for it continues!) an extraordinary adventure of discovery. Modern man often loses himself in the blind rush to be seemingly in control of anything in his life, and we live in a society that has never learned to say ‘enough’. To stare into the brood box of a beehive on a June Saturday morning’s inspection is to understand how much more pleasurable it feels not to be in charge, but to be working instead with the



Bees will make around 12 foraging trips from the hive each day, main; Roger Morgan-Grenville, above

“At the end of our first season we had seven pots of honey to show for our £950 of investment”

grain of nature, and trying to be no more than a sympathetic enabler. Unlike humans, the honeybee can only think in terms of the colony of which it is a part; it has no device for thinking about itself. So what those 50,000 bees (98 per cent of which will be female workers) are doing is a massive exercise in teamwork: they keep the queen happy, the

colony safe and clean, and they collect stores for the long, cold winter. When a bee stings someone, the physical act of moving away rips the abdomen open and the bee quickly dies of dehydration. And, no matter how much money you might spend, and how many courses you do, how many videos you watch and books you read, the colony will work or fail by its

own devices. All you can do is provide the best possible environment.

The second piece of magic was the reintroduction of the awe of nature into my life. As a boy, my summer holidays were spent on the Isle of Mull, so my days were filled with swimming with seals and following seabirds as far out to sea as I dared. Then, as happens to most of us, I entered my adult world of job applications, tax returns and weekly budgeting, and my sense of awe receded far into the background, reignited occasionally by a wonderful view, or a sunset, but otherwise dormant. Working with nature and my bees, and researching for myself the secrets of their extraordinary world, has given me new eyes. And with those eyes, I have noticed the vast iceberg-tip of rest of the natural world around my garden.

That bee you see going from dandelion to dandelion on your lawn, for example. She will do about 12 foraging trips from the hive each day, and on each one she will visit maybe 40 flowers. Multiply the 500 points of contact she has in a day by the 30,000 other foragers in just that one

hive, and you are already at 1.5 million trips. Multiply those by the 250,000 colonies of honey bee in the UK, and again by the 240 other types of bumble and solitary bee, and then again by the 27,000 other species of insect in our country and you end up with countless billions of little intersections of life going on around you. These intersections are generally feeding trips, as is about 90 per cent of all animal movement, and if the pollination service they provided had to be done by us, Defra have estimated it would cost about £800 million a year.

But the third thing I discovered along the way was the most encouraging of all, and it is that the decline in our bees and other insects is not one-way and it is not inevitable. When the white rhino comes close to extinction, or the puffin that only lays one egg a year, it is mighty difficult to reverse things quickly enough to stop them going beyond the tipping point. But insect populations are more like rubber balls, and they really do bounce back. Remove the conditions that make them suffer – (above all, remove glyphosate from your garden

for ever) – and reintroduce a few weeds, some ivy, a planting plan that lasts over the months, a dish or two of water and an insect house, and your garden will change in months, not years.

I started beekeeping as a little middle-age adventure, almost a joke to amuse my friends with, and produce a few pots of honey at the end of the season. In no way could I possibly have known that it would change my life for ever.

● *Liquid Gold: Bees and the Pursuit of Midlife Honey* by Roger Morgan-Grenville is published today by Icon, £12.99 hardback  
● Roger will be speaking at Portobello Bookshop, Edinburgh, on Monday 23 March at 6:30pm; at Atkinson-Pryce Books, Biggar on 24 March at 7:30pm and at Far From the Madding Crowd, Linnlithgow on 25 March at 7pm



## New play Maim looks to the future to celebrate and fight for Gaelic

Environmental and cultural damage is at the heart of the touring show, writes Joyce McMillan

One of the great strengths of Gaelic culture in Scotland is that it cares not at all for the traditional distinctions between art forms; in the Gaelic-speaking world, music, song and theatre tend to appear as aspects of the same mighty storytelling tradition. When writer, academic and lyricist Alasdair C Whyte, and composer and songwriter Ross Whyte, first started working together in 2016, they rapidly formed into a band working on a unique blend of 21st century electronica and Gaelic song; they named the band Whyte, to celebrate the fact that they had identical surnames even though they are not related, and released an acclaimed debut album called *Fairich*, later that year.

By the summer of 2017, though, they were already exploring a slightly more theatrical way of presenting their work, creating an immersive and cinematic show, *Fairich Live*, for the Made In Scotland showcase at the Edinburgh Fringe. Muireann Kelly, artistic director of Gaelic theatre company Theatre Gu Leor, saw the show, and loved the music; and a conversation started which led, over two and a half years, to the making of the Whyte-Theatre Gu Leor co-production *Maim*, which opens in Glasgow tomorrow before a tour of Scotland.

“*Maim* is a Gaelic word that means panic, terror, consternation or alarm,” explains Muireann Kelly, after a week of rehearsals at the National Theatre of Scotland’s Glasgow base, “and there’s no doubt that we want this show to confront some huge and frightening issues we all face now. It’s about the continuing decline of native Gaelic language and culture in the islands, despite more people learning the language in the central belt of Scotland; and it’s also about the threat posed to traditional Hebridean and west Highland landscapes by climate change, as the sea rises into the machair.

“So it is, yes, about a kind of extinction rebellion on two levels – of the language, and the land itself; and Ross’s score is very much



▲ Alasdair Whyte in rehearsal with Elspeth Turner, left, and Evie Waddell for *Maim*, which opens at the Tron Theatre tomorrow

based around two songs from Whyte’s recent album *Tairm*, which means echo or summons, a kind of gathering-cry. We’ve also pulled together a great team for this show. Apart from Alasdair and Ross, the cast also includes Elspeth Turner, who’s a writer herself and a great advocate for Scotland’s languages, and Evie Waddell, a new graduate from the Traditional Music course at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland who’s also an expert in British Sign Language; so at many points in the show, we’ll be working in three languages, English, Gaelic and BSL. Then there’s choreographer Jessica Kennedy – because this is very much a movement piece – along with designer

the most exciting new challenge of the *Maim* project while in other ways, it represents a continuation of preoccupations which were already shaping both the music he and Ross co-create for Whyte, and his academic work. He was awarded a PhD from Glasgow University in 2017, and now holds a prestigious research fellowship for his work on the disappearing local place-names of south-east Mull, where he grew up, and on what happens to a culture when it loses the knowledge of landscape and history embedded in those names – something most Scots have arguably lost, since English became our dominant language.

“Not all of our songs explore the relationship between self and land and language,” says Alasdair Whyte, “but many of them do, and we made a decision right at the start only to sing in Gaelic. The only way you can really protect a language and culture is make new things out of it, to make it part of the present and future as well as the past; and that’s what we try to do. It’s time for us Gaelic speakers to realise once and for all that our language and culture are in no way inferior to English language and culture. And in striving for that, we’re not defeatist at all; not in this show, and not in the rest of our work.”

● *Maim* is at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, 6-14 March, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 17-18 March, and on tour to Inverness, Aberdeen, Oban and across the islands until 28 March.