

Order vs. Wildness

by JOEL SALATIN

A member of the Virginia Monarch Butterfly Society called me: “Do you know where we can plant a pallet of milkweed seed?”

I didn’t even know Virginia had such an organization. Beyond that, I wondered where in the world they procured a pallet of milkweed seed. As I talked with the lady on the phone, I suppressed my laughter realizing that a couple of hours before I had had a totally frustrating in-the-field meeting with the landlords of one of the farms we rented.

The landlords were more than a little dismayed at the weeds we had created with our mob grazing management. In September, right when the monarch butterfly larvae needed them, those weeds included a healthy contingent of seed-pod-bursting milkweeds. The monarchs were euphoric. The landlords weren’t.

This 90-acre pasture farm had been continuously grazed for years before we rented it. The sparse grass never exceeded a couple of inches in height; clover was virtually nonexistent; thistles dominated the plant profile. In three years, by using mob grazing and aggressive hand tools we vanquished the thistles, but a plethora of edible and often delectable weeds (like milkweed) thrived.

Indeed, that afternoon at our pasture-based summit, Daniel (my son) and I exulted in the biomass volume we had stimulated. Fall panicum, milkweed, redbud, clover and some goldenrod offered color and variety to the orchard grass and dominant fescue sward. The landlords, however, did not share our euphoria. As we stood in armpit-high biomass, arguably more than had been on the farm for de-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF POLYFACE FARMS

Joel Salatin with pastured cattle at Polyface Farms in Swoope, Virginia.

grades, all the landlords could utter was a contemptible and emphatic: “Look at all these weeds.”

I was incredulous. Outdoor and wildlife lovers, the landlords could not make the connection between this diversified, voluminous biomass and the overall health of their pasture farm. We could scarcely walk through the biomass jungle, replete with spiders, field mice and a host of creepy-crawly insects. They wanted a mono-species golf-course look. We wanted full expression of as much diversity as possible. These two objectives could not have been more incompatible. Unable to come to a consensus on landscape objectives, Daniel and I walked away disappointed, terminating the lease. Life is too short to spend every day arguing.

Later that evening, the monarch butterfly lover, milkweed propagator, called. How ironic. I assured her that she didn’t need to plant milkweeds. They love Shenandoah Valley pastures in the fall. I explained that all you had to do was create a pastoral mosaic by moving the herbivores every day to a new paddock. The recently grazed, waiting to be grazed and recovering from grazing paddocks encourage multi-speciation and ongoing plant expression throughout the year. In other words, rather than having all the acreage at the same height or physiological point, different paddocks in different stages of growth exhibit a far more quilt-like pattern.

I explained that if the monarch society would spend its efforts encouraging mob grazing, the butterflies would have plenty of wild-grown milkweeds to enjoy. Since cows and sheep like to eat milkweeds, in a continuous-grazed setting the milkweeds never mature to seed stage – they are grazed extremely young as soon as they shoot up above the close-cropped sward.

Although I couldn’t see her, I could tell that my excitement regarding mob grazing to make healthier butterflies



Mobile chicken coops at Polyface Farms.

was too far a stretch for her to comprehend. After all, she had a pallet of seed sitting in her garage that needed to be planted. That was the immediate need of the hour, thank you very much. Don't bother with trifles. I can only imagine her discouragement when talking to fellow butterfly-lovers that she called the most outspoken ecological farmer in the state and got fed a bunch of gibberish about cows, weeds and butterflies. What rubbish.

These two conversations on the same day illustrate the tension between order and wildness. I think our culture suffers from the perception that ordered farming, or ordered landscapes, must inherently militate against wildness. Indeed, Henry David Thoreau, as much as I appreciate most of his observations, perpetuated this idea of wildness as separate from human intervention. Perhaps he did not realize at that time, like we do today, the extent of landscape manipulation his area had been subjected to for millennia before European arrival.

Indeed, the very soil fertility the colonists enjoyed had not been built with dark, foreboding forests. These fertile soils developed under silvo-pastures meticulously maintained by migrating herbivores, predation (both two-legged and four-legged varieties) and strategic fires. The deep, dark, brooding eastern forests of Ichabod Crane mystique were a European invention, not Native American, as we now know. To be fair to Thoreau, in his day the tools to replicate wildness in domestic farming did not exist. Tools like electric fencing, plastic water pipe, nursery shade cloth and tinker-toy dimension lumber for light-weight portable shelters.

Can we have wildness without migratory animals and free-roaming fires? Here in Virginia, carving out a state park could not be farther from true wildness. If such a park could re-institute marauding migratory herds, bird flocks big enough and thick enough to blot out the sun for three days (documented in Audubon's journals) along with routine fires, perhaps a semblance of nature's wildness could occur. But barring those parts of the recipe, the designated park is an entirely different concoction.



Chicken tractors in action at Polyface Farms.

Many nature-lovers ignorantly think that a designated spot of human abandonment replicates yesteryear's landscape. Such perceptions are naive.

The idea, perpetuated by Thoreau, that farming order and wildness were mutually exclusive and therefore required segregated and designated areas allows landscape managers to be lazy about wildness. Perhaps *lazy* is too strong a word. But I find it disconcerting that too many farmers, arguably the largest landscape managers, retreat to this segregated mentality just like the radical natural park folks. I'd like to see more creativity, more visceral expressions of commercial farming order not only co-existing with wild systems, but actually enhancing them. Can this be done?

Even in the pages of *Acres U.S.A.* we see pictures of clean-tillage with mono-crops. Using compost and foliar, eco-farmers outperform their chemical-based counterparts. That's good and I'm glad. But can we do better?

A couple of years ago I visited Colin Seis' farm in Australia. Standing in a 200-acre field of oats ready to combine, imagine my surprise at seeing a healthy foot-high stand of diversified prairie-type forages growing under the oats. Inventor of what he calls pasture cropping, Seis has quickly attained world-wide attention for using livestock as an herbicide to weaken an

existing perennial pasture enough for a crop of annuals to germinate and get ahead of the pasture.

The native pasture remains suppressed under the thickening annual crop canopy and finally begins to grow again once the crop begins drying down. By the time the combine comes through and harvests the grain, the pasture is a foot high and growing aggressively. The two keys here are

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using controlled grazing (duplicating migratory herds) strategically to temporarily weaken the existing sod, and secondly, planting does not require clean tillage. The result is arguably less ordered than a successful crop farmer may enjoy, but it's far more wild-oriented.

Field mice still have a place to live. Earthworm burrows remain unmolested. Soil is neither stirred nor inverted. Neither is it herbicided. The point is that the wild ecosystem co-exists with the ordered crop program.

Encouraged by what I'd seen at Colin's, last year on one of our rental properties we planted about 30 acres of corn, winter peas and milo in the late spring into an existing sod that we double-grazed to knock back the forage. We had tremendous germination of the corn and peas. The milo struggled, perhaps because the seed was less aggressive. At any rate, the pasture remained robust but stifled underneath as the canopy closed in. Where we had good fertility, the annuals created a veritable jungle. The peas trellised up the corn and we turned the cows in to graze it, they ate every stalk, leaf and even pulled up some of the corn by the roots.

Some stray weeds and summer annual grasses grew up in this biomass as well, giving a look of random disorder in this sea of biomass. When the cows grazed it off and left a sheet of manure and urine, the perennial grasses responded in kind. This system used no chemicals and no plow. I think we'll do this again.

Foresters in the Appalachians express growing concern about oak health. The most pessimistic experts say it succinctly: "Our oak forests are dying." Most silviculturalists agree that the problem is a lack of periodic disturbance. This used to happen with

fire and large migratory fauna. Today we have neither. Can we duplicate it?

For several years now on some 100 acres of forest we've been running pigs. Using electric fence as a control, we can encircle a 5-acre area and put in 50 hogs for a couple of weeks. This disturbance encourages new species of plants and reduces pest attacks on the trees because the pigs eat worms and bugs around the root collar. As the pigs open up areas and encourage forages under the trees, where prior to their arrival only a static leaf or pine needle mulch covered the ground, wildlife proliferates. Attracted to the more open, diversified landscape, wildlife thrives along with the trees.

Perhaps nothing attracts wildlife more than riparian areas. Water is not only the lifeblood of a farm; it's the lifeblood of wild areas. Imagine a few centuries ago when millions of beavers from New Mexico to New England made massive shallow ponds across the landscape. We don't have the beavers like that, but we do have track loaders and other excavation equipment. In fact, we can build

ponds more strategically on the landscape (higher) than beavers ever could.

Permaculture has done a wonderful job encouraging water impoundments on the landscape. From waterfowl to thirsty deer, riparian areas attract wildlife while providing landscape hydration opportunities. Whether used for livestock water or irrigation, ponds create integrated wild-ordered models. You can indeed have your cake and eat it too.

I can't imagine why any farmer would put in pretty lawn fences before having functional ponds. We in eco-agriculture should lead the way in illustrating a wild-friendly agrarian model. Most environmentalists I encounter still believe that wildness must be sacrificed in order to have productive agriculture.

They are duped by the industrial/mechanical agriculture mindset that preaches intensification through mono-crops and factory animal houses to supposedly free up land for wildness (or wilderness, depending on the legislation of the day).

This is a tension that need not exist. My brother, Art, an airplane mechanic by profession, has built a thriving honeybee business at Polyface. Even though apiarists document all sorts of maladies today, his bees are doing quite well. He doesn't feed sugar water, never moves the hives around and leaves enough honey for them to overwinter. One other thing: because our pastures are diversified and uneven in age, we always have something blooming.

If we as a culture actually farmed like wildness mattered, we would not be transporting pollinators from place to place. Moving bee yards across the country is symptomatic of single-species, single-aged production. Wildness depends on internal balance for security. In wild systems, nobody injects energy, plants or animals into the system; it must be a viable community by its own synergy. What if we simply agreed that a food system that requires moving bee hives from place to place is an assault on nature? What would man-made farming order look like that respected the order of the bees?

It would look like a mosaic of diversity, in real time. It would be a cornucopia of uneven-aged plants offering pollinators blossoms throughout the season. It would be a place where animals and plants thrived together, rather than in exclusive designated spots. It would be a dramatically interesting landscape rather than a monotonous one.

Submitting our perceived order to the order of the bees, I suggest, is at least a starting point in nesting our farms into wildness. Why must farming and wildness be mutually exclusive?

That is not to say that on our farm we don't shoot coyotes that kill chickens. Nor does it mean we're forgiving toward a she-coon who teaches her babies how to kill laying hens. Humans are part of the ecology too, and so we

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The author with pastured turkeys.

participate viscerally and actively, like we have since the beginning of time. We are part of the balance.

An urban area that bans deer hunting, for example, has no clue about how wildlife functions, or how the predator-prey relationship works to maintain wildness balance. I find it disconcerting that folks exist who send money to an environmental organization to maintain wildness somewhere but at the same time hire a landscape service to spray their lawns with herbicides and chemical fertilizers to insure an ordered domestic habitation. This is intellectual schizophrenia.

I see it among farmers as well. Even in my own decision-making. It's almost as if we validate our human importance by reveling in the extremes of mechanical precision toward biology. Jerry Brunetti has done us all a favor by documenting, over

and over, that brush and weeds often out-nutrition farmer-preferred plants. Those overgrown fences actually provide tonics and supplements, not to mention places for birds to nest.

Landscapes should fascinate the eye and the mind through varietal symbiosis rather than through the hubris of human accomplishment. We work in tandem with nature. We are co-laborers, not tyrants or even masters. When Joel Arthur Barker introduced the world to the word *paradigm* a couple of decades ago, he noted that paradigms appearing to reach perfection are on the point of collapse. I can't help but think of this principle when I see the supposed panacea promise of genetically modified organisms – which arguably represent the current pinnacle of human-imposed order upon genetic wildness – breaking down with incriminating study after study.

We can all thank people like Jeffrey Smith for keeping us abreast of the latest GMO take-downs. That many humans actually think we can penetrate biologically-alive DNA wildness with inanimate mechanical precision makes thinking people shudder. This epitomizes our fixation on order.

Nature's order certainly trumped man-made manipulation with the rise of bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Feeding dead cows to cows violated every natural pattern observable in the wild. Bison don't eat dead bison. Wildness presents the patterns and we

humans should leverage our creativity and mechanical inventiveness to caress these patterns. But override them we dare not.

In my own lifetime I've seen an entirely new lexicon of warning signals. Thankfully the development of indoor plumbing, electricity and stainless steel brought the infectious disease symptoms of unhygienic living under control. Now we're fighting both a rising new tide of non-infectious diseases and a new high-pathogenic problem: *salmonella*, *E. coli*, *campylobacter*, *listeria*. From food allergies to porcine virulent diarrhea (now killing every fourth piggie born in the United States) nature's wildness reminds us that hubris-based order must always submit to design that we don't necessarily understand.

Why is a pig the way a pig is? Why is a violet the way a violet is? Ultimately, it's a mystery. As eco-farmers, we embrace that mystery for magnificence beyond comprehension. Rather than conquering, we submit. We work with wildness, not against it. Indeed, we should be wildness allies, weaving into our farmscapes the mystery and patterns wildness exhibits. That is our high calling and sacred mission.

Joel Salatin operates Polyface Farms in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley with his family. He is the author of several books on ecological, family-scale farming, including *Fields of Farmers: Interning, Mentoring, Starting, Continuing*, available from the Acres U.S.A. bookstore at www.acresusa.com or by calling 800-355-5313.