



STREET GOAT

URSULA BILLINGTON is delighted to find a nomadic farm thriving in the urban wilds of Bristol. Illustrations by ROSANNA MORRIS.



Purdown is a favourite spot in east Bristol to escape the noise and smog of the M32. Just ten minutes up the hill and across its green expanse, bluebell woods behind and panoramic city views spreading out in front make a claustrophobic urbanite feel like they're on top of the world.

And the hill has another surprise in store to wrench a visitor out of their urban reality. Horns poking out above a hedge, a clump of coarse hair or a bleat on the breeze give the game away: goats.

They're the last animal a passerby would expect to see in the middle of the city, and yet surely one of the most welcome: with their nodding gait, wild eyes and wispy beards, their endearing furry presence has come to be seen as a part of this landscape. Not a natural part exactly, more a fun addition.

But they're not just here for fun. The goats provide a vital service, naturally grazing back the vociferous scrubby plants and encouraging new species to spring up, which also benefit pollinators and overwintering insects. Biodiversity net gain!

Their guardians are Street Goat, a collective which views itself as an urban arm of the regenerative farming movement, now celebrating its tenth year of rearing goats in the city, and turning neglected green spaces into rich, healthy ecosystems while supporting sustainable food production.

For some sites the goats have been transformative. Hengrove Mounds, a nature reserve in south Bristol developed over a former landfill site, has become a wildlife and wildflower haven since the goats arrived in 2023.

"There were six feet high brambles in tons of places," says Carol Laslett, a longstanding Street Goat member. "Over time, with the goats eating them, we've seen orchids re-emerging from the seed bed, growing right where the brambles had been. Taking out the rough scrub allows life and space for the smaller broadleaf plants and flowers to grow. You get more and different plants coming up, therefore more food and different plants for insects. We have seen that landscape change so much."

While they started out on just two sites, one for grazing and one for milking, the project has grown as landowners have realised the benefits of using animals over machines. At its height it had around 70 goats in the herd and three or four

milking groups requiring ten milkers each, a demanding workload for a voluntary organisation.

Now they've slimmed to a more manageable 40-ish goats across one milking site and a handful of grazing sites including overgrown allotments, peri-urban farms and nature reserves. They are careful to match the size of land and amount of vegetation to the number of goats placed on it, enabling the herd to be kept in natural forage to avoid resorting to grains or hard feed. The project takes responsibility for the animals from birth to death, ensuring the goats 'only ever have one bad day' when the males – either born to the milkers or bought as

'waste' from dairy farms - that have been grazing parcels of land are big enough to produce enough meat to cover their own abattoir processing costs and are taken to slaughter, providing ethical high-welfare local meat that sells by word of mouth, and skins which are sold, often to drum makers, after being treated at a natural tannery.

Conservation grazing has risen hugely in popularity in the last decade says Laslett, though that has to come with an acceptance of a different way of working: "With machines you can make a plan. Animals won't necessarily eat what you want or where. If you really want an animal-led landscape which is good for biodiversity then you've got to let the animals do what they want, to a certain extent, and be led by that. Otherwise we're just doing what we want again which is what has led us into problems in the first place!"

Laslett says they've been lucky in that the landowners, particularly the council, Avon Wildlife Trust and local park rangers, have sought them out. But Rowan Dumper-Pollard, a member for four years with a background in goat farming, offers a different perspective:

"In terms of what's made us a success, we've had some bold and brave individuals who've gone out to organisations we're trying to get access to land from and asked how can we make it work. They've just gone along and done it. These are people who don't have reservations about asking for help and collaborating. None of us are going to be buying land any time soon, a lot of us are renters and don't have huge amounts of capital to sink into something like this. So it requires a lot of ability to go out, talk to people and negotiate the arrangements."



It was the opportunity to get involved in farming with flexibility that attracted Rowan to the project when he moved to Bristol seven years ago.

"It's not the perfect model, it has its challenges, but having experienced goat farming at home in Devon - there aren't holidays, everything falls on you, you can't have a proper break unless you spend ages training someone up," he says. "Coming to Street Goat where I can live my other life as well as do this is pretty amazing."

"It's not exactly what farming's like but it's a close idea. Leaving the countryside and coming to the city, I meet a lot of people who haven't spent any time with animals at all. That part is invaluable."

And, while animal connection coupled with access to local, sustainable milk and meat are initially a prime motivation for members, the project offers a real opportunity to gain a rounded practical experience.

"We glibly say 'urban farming' and we maybe think of the urban bit, but we don't think of the farming bit, which is 24/7, 365 days a year," says Carol. "We're thinking now of milking as the tip of the iceberg. It takes a lot to get an animal to the milking stand. You can't just go in, milk a goat and go away expecting it to be alright."

Rather, there are considerations around mucking out, checking stores, food availability and salt lick, monitoring impacts on the land, regular health checks and infrastructure maintenance, as well as the twice daily milking.

Members, currently at around 15, pay a small yearly subscription fee and, after signing a milker's agreement, take on one or two milking shifts of roughly 45 minutes each per week. They receive training in animal husbandry and are expected to attend monthly workdays and members meetings.

A lighter touch option is the unofficial 'community goatherder' role taken on by around a dozen people living near grazing sites who check on the goats when out with the dog or on walks round the neighbourhood.

While the group operates non-hierarchically Rowan, a food systems researcher with the Organic Research Centre, says necessary knowledge and responsibility add complications to the informal set up:

"In academia the cooperative model is very favourable so I've always had a positive view on it. But with livestock farming in particular, sometimes you have to make quick decisions or something could go really wrong. There are times when you can't get a consensus and you just have to crack on."

"With livestock there is an element of responsibility - one of them could die, so there's always more weight to the decision



making and, quite naturally, one would always defer to someone who has more experience.

"We need to get better at educating people who are part of Street Goat so they feel more able to make those decisions. But truthfully, I grew up on a goat farm and it takes years to learn the detail around animal health."

He also stresses the considerable behind-the-scenes workload essential to keep the community interest company (CIC) operational: "It's a big factor. There are lots of normal farming administrative tasks we have to undertake. We have to be compliant, so we have a holding number registered with Defra for our fields and also grazing licences, provided by the council or landowner. We have to maintain those records. Every time we move an animal we have to do a movement form - which is a lot!

"There are requirements for a CIC in terms of managing finances, having a directorship and so on. There's a lot that ticks along in the background that definitely should be borne in mind.

"Every exciting food organisation will have fun tasks and others which aren't so fun. It's easy to get a volunteer to come along to milk a goat or clip hooves. Trying to catch goats is an exciting way to spend a weekend. Then there's all the admin which supports that, which enables all the good public facing stuff but is a bit of a burden."

Still, for Street Goat that burden is outweighed by the benefits of living alongside goats in the city which are being increasingly recognised, perhaps a symptom of nature-starved urban lifestyles or a drive towards localised food and land management systems. Rowan mentions messages from people in Durham, Edinburgh, London and Bath looking for advice in setting up a similar project.

"I think it is replicable," he says, referencing Grazing Management, a commercial company where "the goats have a job, to eat down and clear the land," while Carol suggests in another model families work together, each taking responsibility for the goats for one day per week. "There are different ways of doing it," she enthuses.

And, of course, there are countless examples worldwide to draw from: “The idea of the community working together to look after livestock isn’t new at all,” says Rowan, namechecking his barber who is from Kurdistan: “He wasn’t fazed when I explained what I’d been doing and why I might have smelt a bit when I came for a cut! It’s novel here, but definitely not globally.”

Back in the UK, with authorities waking up to regenerative practices, new projects are more likely to find local landowners open to the idea of goat grazing: “Slowly councils are starting to understand this is a great way to manage their land,” says Rowan, mentioning Carmarthenshire as one place this change is being seen. “People exposed to animals, learning about food, managing spaces, making them feel safer... It ticks a lot of boxes for them.”

Both members are enthusiastic about the idea of new Street Goats popping up across the country but suggest that, whatever group structure is chosen, there are a few essential bits of guidance to follow when starting out.

Going into the project clear-eyed is essential, says Carol: “Be realistic about how much work it will be. You need people to realise what they are committing to. So long as everybody does their bit, it works! Finding land and enough people are

the key things to start with, and to be very clear about what you expect from each other.”

Active community building is crucial: “Make things easy and clear for people coming into the project. Have meaningful tasks ready for them so they can feel part of something quickly. That takes a lot of capacity, dedication, time, and developing clear structures that all agree on,” says Rowan.

“Find a group of people with similar principles and aims,” adds Carol. “Put boundaries down when you recruit the team, because it can be just one foot in front of the other and you can lose sight of where you’re going. Be tough around setting out aims and objectives and reviewing them.”

But, she says, don’t forget to keep one thing top of mind: “Enjoy the goats! It is possible to miss that because you become so task focused. But it’s what motivates us, always.

STREET GOAT’s model is intended to be adaptable to almost any urban context: find out more and contact them via www.streetgoat.co.uk

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Street Goat Milking Members Agreement

Street Goat is based on a co-operative Community Supported Agricultural model and thus it is important to outline a standard set of expectations for all members to follow. Below is an outline for all milking members, different sites will have slightly different operating practices so it is important that on top of the below, you are aware of the expectations at your respective site.

1. Practices : Street Goat is a farming project, with the aim of producing animal products sustainably in an urban environment. Decisions around the project and the goats will always be viewed through this lens. The goats are livestock and thus must be considered in a compassionate but utilitarian way. Goats will go to slaughter when it is deemed appropriate by Street Goat’s decision-making processes. This includes retired milkers. You should only commit to join as a member if you are comfortable with that reality.

2. Members of Street Goat are expected to respect the sites we operate on. All our sites are used in partnership with other organisations, so it is important that we are considerate of our neighbours, respecting their needs and guidelines.

3. Responsibilities : Members are responsible for committing to at least one shift a week (preference for two). This must be signed up for on their site’s respective rota (found in the Whatsapp group descriptions).

4. Daily duties required of members include:
a) Care: feed, water, milk, check feet, bedding, collecting poo from all areas of the pen/field the goats are in.

b) Site maintenance: check fencing, feedstore and pens/parlour, move spent bedding.

c) Cleaning equipment.

d) Read/ maintain records. Fill in yields

spreadsheet and rotas.

e) Communicate with other members appropriately.

f) Monitor health: Reading records, observing and recording wellbeing, using appropriate tools to monitor, contacting help if needed.

g) Any site specific tasks agreed upon by your respective site.

5. If you plan to be away for a length of time that makes it not possible for you to complete any shifts in a given week, you must notify the appropriate group via Whatsapp as far in advance as possible and make a note of your absence in the appropriate rota.

6. If you unexpectedly cannot make a shift you have signed up for, please notify the appropriate group(s) via Whatsapp a.s.a.p. We will always endeavour to support each other and cover any gaps. Please do not just remove your name from the rota and not notify anyone.



On The Goodness of Goats

GILL BARRON rhapsodises over the capricious yet utilitarian charms of these most elegant animals.

Every goat-keeper, past or present, has a heap of stories to tell about them. The founder of this magazine (yes, him) used to herd a small flock in the rocky Garrigue of the South of France, many charming nannies including Fifroline and Chèvre-au-lait, stabled at night in a cave whose front wall was made of supine wine bottles (empty, of course). My own favourite goat was Pearl, lent to me by a kind friend when I was bored and lonely living on a rocky Cumbrian outcrop in a yurt. Pearl liked best to drive around in the back of a rickety little Fiat 500, her chin resting on my shoulder and her beard hanging over so that I could stroke it thoughtfully as we travelled; the closest I've ever got to having a beard of my own. She also earned us a few bob at village sports days as the Bearded Lady, hidden in a tent so as not to spoil the surprise.

But, enough nostalgia — since those heady last-century days, much has changed on the British farming front. Good news: goats are making a comeback. Their milk, cheese and butter are now more appreciated for their flavour and healthiness, as the poor old dairy cow continues to get a kicking from eco-purists. There's nothing un-eco about a goat, apart from their bad habit of trashing trees, of course, but this stems from their omnivorous vegetarianism and love of the tough stuff. This points to their most valuable service.

As rewilding — whether deliberate or just by neglect (in practice, much the same thing) — encroaches ever deeper into the margins of our towns, it becomes apparent that “rewilding”, in the real world, mostly translates as — *brambles*. Call these places edgelands, waste ground, peri-urban surplus or whatever, they are abandoned to opportunistic weeds, shrubs, saplings. In a hot summer these dry out fast and become tinder for any passing spark. Hence the scary wildfires that have recently rampaged through the suburbs.

In the country, wildfires have always been a summertime thing. Careless ramblers drop fag-ends. Stressed farmers store hay before it's fully crunchy-dry, causing spontaneous combustion. In my village, surrounded by rough commons and moorland, the sight and sound of our very own fire engine, proudly driven by our Molly's Auntie Heather's daughter Lisa razzing along Main Street on a hot summer's day hardly raises an eyebrow. But as fires creep closer to peripheral housing estates (and thus affect property values, and insurance costs) they become more newsworthy.

Agricultural abandonment is largely to blame; agri-businesses have no interest in acreage too small for mega-tractors to cultivate. Builders' land-banks lie fallow. The time-honoured way of preventing wildfires from engulfing human settlements is to graze sheep or goats on nearby marginal land that might otherwise become a tinderbox of dry grass and



Photo: Gill Barron

scrub, but as the radius of the urban economy expands, the peasant classes are squeezed out by property prices and the rising cost of living, not to mention social prejudice against people who attempt more self-sufficient lifestyles. One rarely sees Travellers' horses tethered out on waste ground these days, more's the pity. A useful service that should have been more appreciated.

However, on the west coast of the USA, massive fires that threaten Hollywood's stars have created an opportunity for an enterprising new breed of professional goatherds. With brand-names such as “Healing Hooves” and “Rent-a-Ruminant”, these flocks of goats and sheep are hired out to municipal and private landowners expressly to control inflammable vegetation. Solar-powered electric fencing makes the shepherd's job much easier. This extends the concept of conservation grazing beyond privileged areas of special nature value into the peri-urban fringes that nobody much cares about, but which, once grazed, may also harbour precious butterflies and nightingales.

As the preceding article explains, community-managed goat flocks are also a viable proposition in Britain, and there's no reason why Bristol's tried and tested Street Goat model shouldn't expand into every town and city that has a neglected industrial hinterland. What better way to engage local people with the benefits, not just spiritual but also nutritional, of nature? Alienated youths with no academic leanings — so-called Neets — will love goats, because it's impossible not to. It's meaningful work, with co-operation and responsibility, just like that, and goat cheeses sell for lots of money. The local fire brigade might be happy to sponsor? Why ever not?