



The Last Wilderness, A Journey into Silence

Neil Ansell

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Neil Ansell's *The Last Wilderness* is a mesmerising book on nature and solitude by a writer who has spent his lifetime taking solitary ventures into the wild. For any readers of the author's previous book, *Deep Country*, Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* or William Atkins *The Moor*.

The experience of being in nature alone is here set within the context of a series of walks that Neil Ansell takes into the most remote parts of Britain, the rough bounds in the Scottish Highlands. He illustrates the impact of being alone as part of nature, rather than outside it.

As a counterpoint, Neil Ansell also writes of the changes in the landscape, and how his hearing loss affects his relationship with nature as the calls of the birds he knows so well become silent to him.

The Last Wilderness, A Journey into Silence Details

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Author : Neil Ansell

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From Reader Review The Last Wilderness, A Journey into Silence for online ebook

Amanda Greenwood says

Really got captured by this book and could picture where Neil was

Zarina says

I've been meaning to pick up more nature writing and this has been the perfect introduction. Neil Ansell's astute observations and eloquent descriptions of his solitary journey through the remote Scottish highlands was a sheer delight to experience – bringing a sense of calm to my hectic days with the sheer power of his words.

Even to someone like me who cannot possibly imagine leaving modern amenities behind for the wild, his writings about the tranquil landscape and animal life he came across on his path sounded like a very tempting alternative to having my weeks and months fly by in a busy city where the bird sounds are drowned out by human noise.

What I particularly enjoyed within this memoir was Ansell recounting travel stories from throughout his life, linking, for example, an animal encounter in the present to one from years before on a different continent. Having spend some time in similar places to Ansell I recognised certain locations, but his perceptive observations far exceeded my own, creating a far richer experience; even second-hand through his wonderful words.

A truly beautiful and serene read, providing a point of calm in our fast-paced and ever-connected lives and a renewed appreciation of the natural world surrounding us.

4.5 stars

Julian Walker says

Lyricaly written observations on nature, life and the disappearing world (both real and aural).

This was an unexpected delight (an Amazon recommendation following another book I enjoyed - and their algorithm really worked). A wonderful read, thoroughly engaging, and beautifully descriptive.

I treasure trove of a book.

Fabulous.

Chantal Lyons says

This book won't appeal to everyone, but it has a huge amount to offer to anyone who loves nature writing.

It's much more repetitive than a lot of other recent books of nature writing, though not exactly in the format of "person going to the same place over and over" like Rob Cowen's 'Common Ground'. No - what makes this book "repetitive" is the narrative pattern that the author follows in each section: he heads out with a general route in mind, he walks, climbs and scrambles, he finds lochs or rivers or beaches, he admires the trees and the wildlife.

But it never gets boring. It's a wonderfully calming, entrancing, and at times delightful read. You can feel the lushness and the ancientness of oak and pine woods, the ruggedness of the landscape, the shape of the coastline. There is plenty of wildlife, though the author doesn't set out to find anything in particular (except, perhaps, wildcat) - songbirds, eagles, waterfowl, deer, otters. The very last wildlife encounter was a particular joy to read. I am more desperate than ever to return to Scotland.

I love the prose itself too. It's never overblown, it never tries too hard to describe familiar things in new, quirky ways. Images are still vivid; they're just subtly drawn. Many passages compel you to re-read them.

A book to treasure.

Henry Gee says

There is a part of all of us that would like to be like Neil Ansell, unafraid to pack the fewest of belongings and head out into the wilds. Most of us do this only in our dreams, yet Ansell has been footloose since his earliest youth, and has spent much of his life a solitary wanderer. The Last Wilderness tells the story of his return, in poor health, to the wilderness that first started him off - the 'Rough Bounds' of the Western Highlands of Scotland, the near-inaccessible peninsulas just inland of Skye and the Small Isles. A series of hikes over the course of a year sees him scrambling up cliffs, slithering down scree, and coming face to face with red deer, seals, otters and an aviary of birds. He didn't manage to see a wild cat, though a wild cat did see him. There is an elegiac quality to this, as, page by page, we learn how progressive deafness is removing the song of first one bird from his experience, and then another - hence the book's subtitle, 'a journey into silence'. And again, how a once-heroic stamina is being weakened by a kind of slow-motion heart failure. Trails that he once bounded along with carefree ease become gloomy and arduous. It is all very beautiful, and almost painfully sad. As I came to the end of the book I kept thinking of Raspberries, Strawberries, a song by the Kingston Trio from my parents' record collection: A young man goes to Paris, as every young man should/ there's something in the air of France that does a young man good... An old man returns to Paris, as every old man must/ He finds the winter winds blow cold, his dreams have turned to dust.

Paul says

Neil Ansell like being alone left to his thoughts and musings and preferably in a place where he can absorb the tranquillity whilst being outdoors. It hasn't happened as much as it used to as he now has two daughters and the responsibilities that come with being a parent.

His chosen wilderness is the West Coast of Scotland. This landscape offers the heady mix of islands, white beaches and blue seas, temperate rainforests (yes really), undisturbed lochs and majestic mountains. He has chosen this part of the UK to take long walks across the terrain in each of the seasons, aiming to immerse himself in nature and become part of it rather than just an observer. The interplay of light across the rolling

hills as the weather changes almost minute by minute. Being so remote, the chances of coming across other people is unlikely and as he treads softly across the landscape and his solitary presence means that he gets to see far more of the animals that inhabit here. The joy of watching otters slipping into the sea lochs, seeing stags silhouetted on the skyline and seeing golden and sea eagles soaring above is tempered by a profound change in the way that he senses the world around. Almost deaf in one ear, he had relied for years on his other, but now that is fading from the highest frequencies down and the bird songs that once delighted him now inhabits his memories only.

Ansell is widely travelled; five continents and over fifty countries is quite a record. He has lived in a forest in Scandinavia, hitchhiked across countries, seen the wild animals of the Amazon, lived in squats in London and spent five years in a cottage in Wales with no running water or electricity. By returning to the same part of Scotland, it feels like a spiritual journey and he connects deeply to the landscape each time he visits, but it is tinged with the remorse that he has of no longer being able to hear the birdsong. It is a beautiful book to read, he has a knack of teasing out all that he sees around him into the most exquisite prose. I think that the writing is as good as *Deep Country*, which if you haven't read then you should. Another excellent book from Ansell.

Natalie (CuriousReader) says

Shortlisted for the Wainwright Prize 2018.

Video Review: <https://youtu.be/mDyu7EbWWC8>

Oliver says

A memoir of a kind told through the lens of wandering through the rough bounds on the west coast of Scotland at intervals throughout the year. The journey anchors the musings and reminiscences through his past travels and felt much like Murikami's style in 'What I talk about when I talk about running' (another one of my favourites). Like George Monbiot in 'Feral', his love of the natural world comes across in a lyrical, poetic fashion, with whimsical lines like "...And beetling his brow and becoming aware, with an awareness that has no words, of a potential future..." Just delightful in places. The one aspect which began to grate slightly was his insistence on shoehorning reference to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* into the narrative, mirroring his personal loss of hearing and hence the birds he loved from the landscape. It seemed like an early and clever idea which he had decided to include as a repeating theme and had not been able to abandon as the project took greater shape.

Juliet Wilson says

Subtitled *A Journey into Silence*, this is a beautifully written account of one man's explorations of the Highlands of Scotland as he meditates on his increasing deafness (which he measures by the birds he can no longer hear sing) and the loss of species from our countryside. He writes about his preference for being in nature by himself and I can totally understand that love of solitude, however as it becomes clear that failing hearing is not his only health concern it starts to seem foolhardy of him to be out there by himself, not for him alone (that is after all his decision to make) but because he is single parent to two children.

Setting that concern aside I did really enjoy this book. Ansell's writing is beautiful without falling into the self-conscious overly poetic style beloved of many of the more literary nature writers of the day. Here is his description of the call of the curlew:

'Once of twice, a curlew called its plangent, rising trill. For me, this is the most evocative of all bird calls. It has a visceral effect on me, like a punch to the solar plexus. Whenever I hear it I am immediately transported back to my childhood self, wandering the marshes alone.'

I love the way he weaves together his observations of the Scottish Highlands alongside similar experiences in other times or other places (though this does become slightly confusing on occasion, perhaps deliberately so).

Fiona says

Warning! Those of a non-pedantic disposition should not read my review!

I'll start with all the positives about this book. As an enthusiastic walker (although I'm currently very limited due to temporary health issues), I thoroughly enjoyed wandering the Rough Bounds of NW Scotland in Neil Ansell's company. I can find nature writing boring at times but I'm not sure I would really classify this book as such. He's clearly knowledgeable about birds, animals, plants and trees but he rarely goes beyond describing what he's seeing as a backdrop to his walks. I was happy with that.

The title 'A Journey into Silence' is a wry comment on his loss of hearing which is steadily worsening. For someone who loves nature to be gradually losing the ability to hear birdsong is a tragedy. Also, he has other health problems that are making the physical demands of walks such as these less likely in the future. Ansell ruminates on these problems occasionally but not to the point of becoming maudlin.

So what are my problems with the book? Firstly, and I know this is extremely pedantic, but having said that he can hear very little now, he tells us on more than one occasion that '*there was no sound at all*' or '*there was a complete silence*'. Well, was there? Or was it that he could hear nothing? In my experience, nature is rarely, if ever, silent.

Secondly, there were inconsistencies in his text. On a walk to a bothy, he reflected on what he might do if it was already full as he '*had failed to pack a tent*'. Four pages later, on finding the bothy already occupied, he sets off '*to find a beach to pitch my tent on*'.

It was usually possible to track his walks on an OS map so I know that his description of looking down on a loch around which there was no trail is just wrong. I checked with walking websites and the route along the north side of the loch - his side - is a clear and popular track. Yes, I know I'm being pedantic but accuracy matters to me.

Thirdly, those with little experience of walking in wilderness areas are unlikely to follow in his footsteps but sadly some will and every year the rescue services are called in to search for idiots who have set off with little preparation and less of a clue. In the same way as a disclaimer was issued at the end of every episode of Julia Bradbury's enjoyable Wainwright Walks tv series, so should this book carry one. Ansell frequently gets

lost and relies only on his sense of direction and the hope that he will see a hill or loch that he recognises to set him back on the correct path. I find that completely irresponsible and frankly idiotic. He also drinks directly from mountain streams and lochs without first purifying the water. Dead sheep juice anyone?

Lastly, Ansell is very well travelled having spent much of his life wandering around the world backpacking. I'm sure a book on these travels would be a really interesting read but I found his anecdotes intrusive in this book. One minute I was walking in the wilds of the Highlands, the next he had me in Sweden, or Australia, or South America, or Africa. These interruptions often jarred and it was then that this mixture of outdoors/nature writing combined with autobiographical musings just didn't work for me. There's rather a tongue in cheek quote towards the end of the book when he shows some insight by saying, *'It reminded me of a long time ago. Of course it does, you say, everything reminds him of something else.'* I have no argument with that statement!

And breathe.....

Overall, I really did enjoy this book for the reasons given at the start of my review. Ansell raises thoughtful questions about solitude. Is it only a pleasure when we know we have someone to return to? Would it be such a pleasure if we didn't? For me personally, the answer to that question is easy. Definitely 4 stars and recommended if you love NW Scotland or would like to learn more about it.

With thanks to NetGalley and Tinder Press for a review copy.

AJW says

This book was a surprise gift to me from a good friend. He thought I would like it. He was wrong.

I loved it.

In a nutshell, the book is about the author visiting on his own a remote part of Scotland five times over the course of a year. He writes about where he walked, what he saw and the memories these visits evoked from a lifetime of travelling.

I can see why my friend thought I would like the book as I too like to walk and explore wild remote places on my own. The other shared experience is that Neil Ansell is losing his hearing, as I already have. We are kindred spirits and I enjoyed reading this memoir.

A big "thank you" to my friend who spotted this book & bought it for me. I don't think I'd have come across this book otherwise.

Rebecca says

Many travel books are about the quest for new, exotic places and the widest possible range of experiences; many nature books focus on the surprising quality and variety of life to be found by staying close to home. In that loose framework, Neil Ansell's *The Last Wilderness* belongs on the nature shelf rather than the travel section: here he's all about developing his knowledge of a particular place, the Northwest Highlands of

Scotland, where he stays five times over the course of one year to give a panoramic view of the area in different non-touristy seasons.

Ansell's visits have the flavor of a pilgrimage: his wonder at the region's sights and sounds, and particularly at the creatures he encounters, is akin to what one would experience in the presence of the holy; he also writes about wildlife as if it is a relic of a fast-vanishing world. "It is that exploratory desire to possess the wilds for ourselves that has resulted in their disappearance," he notes. A true wilderness is unvisited, and true solitude is hard to experience "if the world is only a click away."

Depicted against this backdrop of environmental damage are the author's personal losses: a heart problem and progressive hearing loss mean that the world is narrowing in for him. He mourns each sign of diminishment, such as the meadow pipits whose call he can no longer hear. Depth of experience is replacing breadth for him, though flashbacks to his intrepid world travels – an African safari, hitchhiking in Australia, time in Sweden and Costa Rica – show that he has tried both approaches. There's a good balance here between adventuring and the comfort of an increasingly familiar place.

Like "a tale told round a campfire," Ansell's is a meandering and slightly melancholy story that draws you in. If *The Last Wilderness suffers*, it's mostly in comparison with his *Deep Country* (2011), one of the most memorable nature/travel books I've ever read, a modern-day *Walden* about his five years living in a cottage in the Welsh hills. Solitude and survival are more powerful themes there, though they echo here too. Once again, he writes of magical encounters with wildlife and gives philosophical reflections on the nature of the self. I can highly recommend Neil Ansell's books to anyone who enjoys nature and travel writing.

Originally published on my blog, Bookish Beck.

Peter Martin says

A great book to chill out with especially for nature lovers and ramblers!

Karen Mace says

I found this to be a calming and enlightening read and am in total admiration of the author and wilderness walker, Neil Ansell, who sets off alone to enjoy the beauty that the world has to offer despite his own failing health.

It is set in the North West Highlands and the descriptions make it sound like heaven on earth! Would have loved to have had some photos to accompany the text, but he has a wonderful way with words that helps paint the picture of the scenes he encounters. And with his failing hearing, you do get the sense that he picks up more on the sights although he does mention the sounds he misses as his beloved songbird soundtrack is slowly disappearing to him because of his deafness.

This doesn't stop him setting off alone to explore the Highlands and noticing changes in the wildlife and scenery from trips he's made years ago, and it does make you worry about the mess that humans are leaving behind, especially as he even finds rubbish dumped along one of his paths in the middle of nowhere.

It's a fascinating mix of nature writing as he encounters a variety of wildlife, alongside his own thoughts on his love of the solitude and how that hasn't always been compatible with his lifestyle, and that he doesn't feel

he's missing out on things because he likes to be alone. It also touches on how those travelling nowadays aren't really cut off from the world with the use of GPS and the internet, as opposed to when you'd occasionally get sent a postcard from someone away and how you can never really be cut off from what's going on in the world because of technology and that saddens him.

I loved how he wrote this over a period of 5 visits over a year so you get to see the changes each season bring and how his outlook differs over each time. It was absorbing and uplifting and I will be more interested to pick up the other books from this author now to enjoy more of his adventures and views.
