

# Into the WILD

From her 1930s garden studio, Ursula Hunter creates graphic lino-block print designs for wallpapers and textiles, which celebrate the natural world

Words PIPPA BLENKINSOP Photographs JEREMY PHILLIPS



The red squirrel, capercaillie and Scottish wildcat are just some of the creatures you can spot hidden among the sprawling branches of a lush rowan tree design that soars up a panel of Ursula's vibrant wallpaper in her studio – but what do they have in common? They aren't simply her favourite animals or random motifs to use as vehicles for decorative expression; they are in fact all endangered species that call Scotland their home, as she does. Fewer than 120,000 red squirrels are left in the wild, 75 per cent of which live in Scotland. The population of the world's largest grouse, the capercaillie, has dropped dramatically in recent times to just 1,200 birds, and it is estimated that as few as a hundred Scottish wildcats remain.

'I'm largely concerned with the relationships between rare species of British animals and plants, and illustrating the fragile micro ecosystems in urban spaces, gardens or wild habitats,' >



THIS IMAGE Ursula in her garden studio, converted from a 1930s garage. Panels of her Endangered Animals wallpaper, and hanging fabric samples (from left) of her Black Pepper, Cardamom, Flood and Vanilla designs, provide a colourful backdrop to her work table. Here she prepares to make a lino-block print, which will then be scanned, digitally repeated and printed onto fabric and wallpaper  
 ABOVE LEFT Ursula's cut lino blocks – some are mounted on wood in order to print onto fabric using the hand-block technique



**TOP** In order to create a seamless repeat design for wallpapers and fabrics, Ursula scans in her lino prints to digitally manipulate and colour them before sending the design to independent wallpaper and fabric printers. This usually means printing a design in a single colour. When the fabrics come back she sews them up into a range of products, from teatowels, cushions and curtains, to wash bags and deck chairs, with the help of her mother, Catherine

**MIDDLE** Ursula's corkscrew press was salvaged by her father; above hang a collection of framed lino prints, hand-coloured using drawing inks

**BOTTOM** She has recently started experimenting with hand-block printing onto fabric using lino cuts mounted on wooden blocks. The samples hang to dry in the garden

says Ursula. 'Although I'm fascinated with decorative pattern and colour, I think it's important for artwork to carry some sort of message, so that we draw attention to the environment and encourage people to take better care of it.' Indeed, by combining carefully researched wild animals and plants with her graphic lino-block printing technique and captivating colourways, Ursula creates unique designs that are like a visual ecology textbook, highlighting conservation issues while delivering decorative delight. 'My aim is to bring the outside in to remind us of our relationship with nature wherever we are,' she says.

Keen to reconnect with the natural environment, Ursula has recently settled into a newly converted garden studio. 'Last year we moved from Glasgow city centre to a 1930s bungalow on the outskirts of Edinburgh,' she says. 'We were looking for somewhere with a garden room, as nature is such a source of inspiration for me, so as soon as I saw this property had a garage attached, I knew it would make the perfect creative space.' With large windows and double doors onto the garden and a wealth of Scottish flora and fauna steps away to examine and explore, it is the perfect environment for her creativity to thrive.

**Have you always been creative?**

I always knew that I wanted to go to art college, so when I left school I took up a place on a Fine Art course at Glasgow School of Art. I'd always dreamed of studying there as I'd long been in love with the beautiful building designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, which is an Arts and Crafts masterpiece. I could have chosen any of the departments, but I chose to specialise in environmental art, where students learned about art in context and made work with a social message. We were encouraged to create art for public spaces, cities and derelict areas. Students would take over the rooms of the crumbling building and create installations that hoped to tackle some of the weighty subjects of the 1990s. It was during the BA that I decided to explore issues in my work, and over the following years I became more focused on the natural environment and wildlife.

**When did you become interested in surface design?**

After graduating I worked on community art projects for a company that worked with adults and children with complex needs, as well as in socially disadvantaged areas in Glasgow. I stopped work when I had my children, but once they were at primary school I wanted to get back into making, so in 2012 I began an MA in Illustration at Edinburgh College of Art. I spent most of my time in the print-making department, where I was particularly drawn to relief printing. I love the hand-cut style produced by the lino-block print and the evidence of the cut marks on the printed surface, along with the strong, graphic lines. It was during the course that I produced my first wallpaper, Endangered Animals. I've always been interested in pattern and print-making and wanted to find ways to apply this to domestic surfaces, as I like the idea of making art accessible to everyone; if you can print a design onto fabric and wallpaper it makes the design part of life.

**Who has inspired you?**

My father has been a great influence on my attitude to life and my appreciation of the handmade. He would always try not to >

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Ursula prints using an old corkscrew press; once finalised on paper, a design is traced onto the lino block and cut with Swiss mushroom handled cutting tools; the lino is inked with water-based inks; Ursula's designs; she covers the inked lino with paper ready for printing - Fabriano Rosaspina is her favourite paper





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Ursula holds up a final print to examine it; she begins her design process by creating detailed botanical drawings – her work space is surrounded by her inspirations, including a wall-hung textile made in India; her tools; her cushions are made up from digitally printed Scottish woven silks and linens – below are her collection of antique Indian printing blocks



buy new, but to make do and mend. He put so much time and effort into his own creative projects that his work ethic definitely rubbed off on me. He was also an avid collector and a specialist in Asian art, so our house was always filled with curious objects found in junk shops, and textiles picked up on his travels to India. All these pieces inspired in me a love of traditional craft.

I have an enduring love of the Arts and Crafts movement and designers such as William Morris, Voysey and William De Morgan. It's such a decorative period and a rich inspiration, particularly the way the designers integrated art into everyday life. I also admire the abstracted textile designs of Lucienne Day and the lino prints of Edward Bawden, especially those he made for London Transport posters, plus the hand-block printed papers of Marthe Armitage and the design studio St Jude's.

### Where do you get your ideas for your work?

It's all about nature. I'm interested in the connection between the variety of animals and plants that populate different natural habitats and the Endangered Animals design has inspired a lot of new work on this theme. Recently I was commissioned to make a series of 34 hand-coloured lino prints for the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow, depicting eight wild Scottish habitats, from the seashore to the mountains. When I looked at the rivers and lochs, I discovered creatures such as the great crested newt, moorhen, the brown trout and the water weasel. I also learned about the alder tree, which has large roots that go into the river, creating sheltered nesting places for waterside animals. At the moment I'm working on a spice plants series, looking particularly at the insects that pollinate the plants and making sure that they're included in the designs, as without them the plants would not survive.

### When did you start your own company?

I set up my business, called Little Axe, after graduating from my MA course, with the aim of creating a small homegrown business with a focus on the handmade. My designs all stem from block prints; it's a process that I really enjoy, so I knew that I would be able to sustain it. It really all began at the kitchen table. It's been exciting developing the business; exhibiting at craft fairs, building the online presence and marketing through social media. It's grown really organically but it has been a steep learning curve getting to grips with pricing and retail.

### What are you working on at the moment?

I've just produced a wallpaper design for a seafood bar, which is in the beautiful village of Luss on the shores of Loch Lomond. It needed a fishy theme, so I created a design based on the great sea voyages of 17th-century spice traders. It's got rolling seas, sailing ships and sea creatures. In turn this has inspired a series of designs on spice plants, which is quite exotic for me. They include black pepper, cardamom, clove and vanilla.

My most recent commission is for a client in Northern Italy. I am doing a range of tableware based on the wildlife found at the foothills of the Alps. It will feature pomegranates, grapes, woodpeckers, azaleas and the fireflies you find there. I'm hoping this will inspire a new Mediterranean series. ☞

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