



## Chrystel Lebas

Since migrating to London from France 23 years ago, my only escape in search of a glimpse of nature within the dense city was walking or cycling along the river or through Brockwell or Battersea Park. I rarely looked beyond these places, as my work always took me outside the urban borders into the “wilderness”.

I realised how unfamiliar I was with the city’s diverse natural landscapes and have only recently discovered some of its hidden gems: for example, the string of ancient woods that dot the cityscape and form the Green Chain Walk. One wood in particular caught my attention – Sydenham Hill

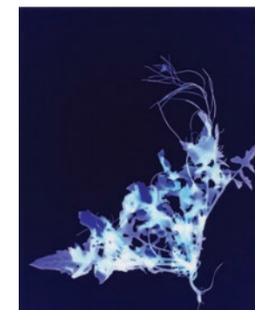
Wood, a mix of new and ancient woodland with remnants of Victorian gardens near Forest Hill in south London. This became the London Wildlife Trust’s first nature reserve in 1982, protecting it from development threats, and it is now one of the largest remaining sections of the Great North Wood, which once covered more than 800 acres.

A dense jungle of entangled vines, large oaks, one cedar of Lebanon and a wide variety of shrubs and other flora populate the slopes. It is easy to get lost in this rather small forest and I often wouldn’t see anyone while roaming during the crepuscular hours until a figure

emerged from behind the trees. Humans have replaced the wild beasts of these ancient woods.

Having developed an interest in botany, especially the unwanted “weeds and aliens” species, I thought of looking for a plant specific to London. Botanist Mark Spencer introduced me to the elusive *Sisymbrium irio* L., commonly named “London rocket”, as it was abundant in the capital after the Great Fire of 1666. However, EJ Salisbury, in his study of London bombsites after the Blitz, “failed to find a single specimen”.

A rare sighting of London rocket was recently recorded near New Cross. After collecting a sample



**Above** Untitled #2, Sydenham Hill Wood, from *Woodland Studies*, 2017

**Left** Photographs from *Weeds and Aliens Studies*, *Sisymbrium irio* L., London rocket, 80 Yellow 130 Magenta 0 Cyan 25 s

from a street pavement, I made a photograph of it, using the analogue colour printing process. Placing it directly on the photographic paper and gradually adjusting the colour filtrations, yellow, magenta and cyan, which changed the way the plant emerges from its dark background, alters our perception of it, elevating it from its status as a simple weed.

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*“Field Studies: Walking Through Landscapes and Archives”* by Chrystel Lebas is published by Fw: books, £48. *“Regarding Nature”* will be shown at The Photographers’ Gallery, London, June 23-August 5; [thephotographersgallery.org.uk](http://thephotographersgallery.org.uk)