

INTRODUCTION

This book draws on writings produced over the last twelve years' residence in the small village of Claxton just a short distance to the east of Norwich. The 140 pieces were originally published in some form in newspapers, magazines or other books and anthologies (primarily the *Guardian*, *Guardian Weekly*, *Eastern Daily Press* and *Birdwatch* magazine). Yet I see them as very much more than a collection of journalism, and of all my books this has taken the longest to write.

The pieces are arranged in chronological order in twelve chapters, each of which covers a single month. They have been placed in sequence with priority given to the day (rather than the year) on which they were intended for publication so that in total they unfold as a diary portrait of Claxton through a single twelve-month period. I have also felt at liberty to change or add to the original versions, in some cases radically, on the basis that newspaper or magazine editors use material in order to meet their own internal requirements. Those needs are not necessarily in the best interests of the submitted text. I believe that an author has a right to revise or to improve earlier drafts in order to convey as truly as possible what was first intended.

Claxton is above everything a book about place, but it is also a celebration of the way in which a particular location can give shape and meaning to one's whole outlook. I view our original move from Norwich to Claxton as pivotal in my career. It happened in August 2001 and arose for professional reasons. At the time I had two columns on nature and wildlife in the *Guardian* and in the subscribers' sister title *Guardian Weekly*. Anybody who has ever written a regular article – a weekly or,

heaven forbid, a daily piece – will tell you of the tyranny exercised by this particular master. There is no forgiveness for late copy, no reprieve for failure to deliver, no chance to suggest that nothing really moved you that week. The allocated print space has to be filled every time, and as soon as this is achieved the next deadline grinds towards you with inexorable, relentless speed.

In these circumstances most writers are playing what pundits call a percentage game: the best that they can do for as much of the time as possible. Not all pieces are perfect or even hit the correct note. From the 450 articles I've written for four such columns over the period since moving to Claxton I have selected less than a third. Of these, 85 per cent have been about wildlife seen in this parish. I have included material written about other locations, but I see these particular articles and the responses that they articulate as drawing inspiration in exactly the same way from residence in Claxton.

Before we moved here things were very different. In order to find subjects on which to write I had to drive my family every weekend, often both Saturdays and Sundays, rain or shine, winter or summer, usually to a coastal location and always to some wilder part of East Anglia. It involved much effort and it was perhaps a strain upon our children, although they seldom if ever complained. Being in the countryside was part of our family routine. It had the incidental benefits of allowing the children when they were very young to acquire vast pebble collections, or to renew their intimacies with favourite trees (in Holkham Park), or to revisit treasured swimming spots (Burnham Overy), to nose out premier blackberrying locations (Waxham) and – best of all – to enjoy the rewards of ice cream and cake at favourite cafés. All of this familial history flowed because in my peculiar line of work the countryside was my office.

By moving to Claxton I acquired an office of my own. Life changed overnight. Wildlife encounters entailed simply walking

out of the front door and heading down Mill Lane across the marsh towards the river. I repeat that ritual now on a weekly and usually a daily basis. And almost always towards the river, to the Yare – like a divining rod, my instincts seem to propel me to the water. Sometimes, however, merely to go out into the garden is enough.

It is odd in a way that such a dry county as Norfolk is so defined by water. Yet it is a region most famous for its coast, lakes, rivers and marsh. It's often that strange paradox: a landscape best seen from a boat. At times Norfolk seems to be just water and sky; elemental layers in which terra firma hardly has a role. In the Yare Valley the ground beneath your feet has its origins in water.

My hope with this book is that readers might be inspired to look more closely at their own immediate surroundings, for, in many ways, there is little that is truly special about Claxton. Like most of the villages in this area, it comprises ordinary farmland. However, we divide its ground into what we call the 'uplands' and the marsh. The first word might conjure hilly places filled with contours, gradients and summits with high winds and views extending to the horizon. There are indeed vast panoramas to be had in Claxton, but they are from places on the twenty-metre contour line. These are our idea of 'uplands'. Really it is any ground above sea level. The land that lies at zero elevation, or thereabouts, is the part we know as the marsh.

It's not just at sea level, once it was sea: the final stretch of an inland arm of the *Oceanus Germanicus* that successive generations from the Romans onwards have wrestled out of the clutches of saltwater and into the estate of human agriculture. Claxton was once water and even now as dry land it retains many of the characteristics of water. It is level and it is large and it dwells under, and sometimes it feels oppressed by, vast skies. It's a landscape built in layers and in level planes of colour. At the uppermost tier is the feather-topped canopy of poplar or

crack willow. A little lower is the fuller, richer, deep green of the distant woods: green mixed with white wherever willow grows, but dark, almost bitter emerald if the dominant species is alder. Closer to the ground is the dense warm tan belt of old reed and lowest of all is the dead brown of old rush or the deep green of the new.

As well as level landscapes, I have a passion for routine. In Nepal in my early twenties I once ate the same meal every day for four months almost without variation: rice, dahl and spiced vegetables. I have a tendency towards music that unfolds very slowly: the compositions of Gavin Bryars (e.g. 'The Sinking of the Titanic') or The Necks (e.g. 'Sex'). The latter, an Australian jazz trio (about whom it was famously written that in their live performances anything can happen and seldom does), create songs that build steadily, patiently, minutely in rhythmic layers – like an incantation repeated inexorably until it triumphs over the listener – for more than an hour.

In order to know it properly a landscape requires routine and repetition. *Claxton* is a celebration of a relationship with place that has been built at a slow tempo. If ever one examines the processes of nature then very few of them happen in a hurry. A crocus or a daffodil freshly emerging from the ground in February never comes up faster than it should, despite one's wishing sometimes that it would. As it spreads across a field when at last the sun emerges from the clouds, that returning flood of sunlight will arrive at the spot where you stand steadily and entirely without haste. Nature keeps its own pace.

To do things routinely, to take the same walk time after time, is not to see the same view over and over. It is to notice the incremental rate of natural change and to appreciate that nothing is ever repeated. I am often struck by the way, when one has had some deeply memorable encounter with an otter, say, or perhaps a sighting of a rare bird or butterfly, that the next day you see almost nothing at all. They are never in the same spot. Nature has a way of balancing its books but it

also has a way of avoiding duplicates. Every time it is unique. In this book I have included several pieces that cover the same basic theme, such as St Mark's flies, otters, swifts or peregrines. This is not just because each of the experiences filled me with a sense of something that had to be communicated; it's also because each one felt like the first time.

VINTAGE  PUBLISHING



JANUARY

6 January 2013

❧ CLAXTON ❧

Because we have so drained the English landscape of any danger to ourselves, I think we easily overlook how potent a factor fear is in the lives of animals. In our parish, where peregrines and harriers are constantly back and forth on patrol, the flocks of lapwings and golden plovers often seem to spend their entire days merely standing and are almost without activity. Yet come darkness and the moon's rise the birds zigzag across the fields on those broad, strangely creaking wings to feed in its protective pale glow. You realise that daylight is all about vigilance and security, while night is the time to feed.

The natural accompaniment to all their days spent standing and watching are the plovers' weird convulsive dreads when, almost like an electric current, fear flushes over the whole flock and launches it skywards. Often one cannot find any genuine cause for these hair-trigger responses. Yet the simultaneity of it is astonishing, as is the beautifully coordinated sweep and flow of their movement. The dreads' impact upon our human senses and imagination is presumably similar to its effect on any predator. The viewer is at once mesmerised but confused by the manner in which so many different animals pool and sway as one. In fact, it so perplexed early ecologists that some even wondered if the birds were not capable of thought transference.

What we overlook perhaps is the rehearsals. Over thousands, and probably millions, of years, natural selection has favoured

those birds with an ability to bury their identities and match precisely their movements to the actions of neighbours. Each generation slowly, cumulatively passed on the advantageous genes, but we forget the ragged processes and see only the flock's fine-honed finished machinery. It is strange to think that as we observe the amoeba-like globe of lapwings wheel and swerve in fantastic unity, we are connected to the instantaneous rush of their nerves and to the ancient time from which such wild perfection has been sculpted.

10 January 2011

🐟 CLAXTON 🐟

I open the door and straightaway can see the four metal rooks in our weathervane all tilting southwards. It may be a south wind but it is hard and sharp. It drives across the River Yare, and the great white steam billow rising above the sugarbeet factory at Cantley sails hard north-north-west for about a hundred metres, then drowns in that vast cold blast. The wind seems to brush through the valley and I am intrigued to note how even the swans, normally so immune to heat and cold, are all in the lee of an earth bank just south of a flight pond. At a distance they look like a last drift of snow heaped up against the black peat.

In the aftermath of last month's freeze the whole landscape has been burnt down to three basic colours. There is the leached green of the marsh itself and then the sedge brown to all the dyke edges and the patches of reed. Then finally there are the woodlands on every horizon. Superficially as I spin around they all seem black, but if I look harder there is a slightly warmer note mingled in, a faint purplish tone that is added in our area only by the alder trees. And there is no mistake: in aggregate the woods are actually puce coloured, precisely the same shade as an old scab.

For all this, as I walk by the Yare there is the faintest hint of change. Perhaps the reason for this lies entirely elsewhere:

our technical knowledge of the date and increment in the season. Perhaps it is the fact that the decorations are all now stowed and the pine needles swept away. Yet there is a sort of bright note in the air, hard to define or to lay to any cause, but it is there indisputably, and if I should give it a name, I wouldn't call it the start of spring. It is more the end of lifelessness.

II January 2010

❧ CLAXTON ❧

The ice has steadily corralled the valley's flock of wigeon into ever-smaller areas of open water. At times two thousand birds are compressed into a dense mass along Claxton's main drain, and when they move into the fields they appear as a single dark slough of life in the hollows of the frozen marsh. On the one hand one senses how the stress of prolonged cold has left the birds more tolerant than usual of a close approach. On the other, and seemingly without good cause, the ducks are also extremely jittery. They bluster in broken wheeling showers from one part of the river to the next. Then, just as inexplicably, they will rise off the Yare altogether and flop into the adjacent dykes. Nothing seems to settle the collective mood.

I love the way they take flight in a prolonged even sequence, so that they peel off the water as a continuous blanket that instantly atomises and falls back to Earth amid a downpour of contact notes. The sound of wigeon is a soft high whistling rather like the breathy note one instinctively makes when told of some startling revelation. Multiply the sound by a thousand and it becomes a tide of music filled with a sense of mildness, innocence and confusion. Yet it also carries other potential resonances. The sound beautifully evokes both place and weather. It seems indivisible from wind and open landscapes where the horizon is distant and the space immense. One cannot imagine a wigeon has ever heard its voice bounce off some solid topography as an echo,

except perhaps during that luxurious fortnight cocooned in the egg beneath its mother's breast. By the same token, one cannot conceive how the adult wigeon can ever produce its questioning note and not be instantly reassured by a neighbour's reply. So wigeon song is at once a song of open space but also of companionability. It is also the defining soundtrack for this parish in winter.

12 January 2009

❧ CLAXTON ❧

It was one of those glorious anticyclonic winter days when you sense that there is not a mote of dust in the entire troposphere. Not only could you see with enhanced clarity in the crystalline air, but your sense of hearing seemed to acquire a higher level of acuity. I picked out the calls of Bewick's swans long before I saw them. They came from the south-east, out of the direct sunlight. Yet even as sharply cut, sun-burnt silhouettes, they never looked completely black, but appeared a muted grey. There were twenty-four birds in a single line vocalising constantly as they approached.

The sound of wild swans is one of the glories of the European winter. The Bewick's call is an unhurried, soft, almost woodwind, pigeon-like sound that has a relaxed, random quality rather resembling wind chimes. The sound of one bird 'bumps' into the responses of its neighbours and these near-sequential notes unfold across the open space of Claxton Marsh as a gentle aerial winter song.

At one point they looked as if they were going to land and several birds drew in slightly and deepened the downward arch of their unflapping wings, so that they stalled in speed yet retained height. The pause allowed them to assess conditions below, where something – alas – made them decide not to land awhile in our fields. Instead they described a slow figure of eight across the sky and banked to head upriver. This freshly

chosen objective introduced a slight urgency into the flight calls, which now sounded wilder, more yelping, almost suggesting the clanging notes of cranes or perhaps the baying of distant hounds.

Bewick's swans are not rare in the Yare Valley. I see small numbers in most years, but there are nothing like the flocks that occur further north in the main Broads area, nor the huge congregations that gather on the Norfolk–Cambridgeshire border. Every sighting here is an occasion and I savoured their woodwind music until it faded eventually back into the customary Claxton silence.

14 January 2008

❧ SURLINGHAM, NORFOLK ❧

The huge oak tree lying on its side is soft and spongy to the touch and with my thumbnail I can drive right into the heartwood. In fact, it seems as much a labyrinth of beetle-gnawed cavities as it is solid fibre. Yet for once the natural insignnia connoting decay and the passage of time are overshadowed by the human structure that stands nearby. St Saviour's Church was probably already a ruin when this oak was a young tree. The building's own roots go back to the early Norman period and archaeological work suggests that its construction may have been contemporaneous with the building of Norwich Cathedral. However, in the late Middle Ages, the village of Surlingham climbed over the hill and then vanished down the other side, leaving St Saviour's alone and neglected. Eventually the round-towered St Mary's eclipsed its neighbour as the place of worship and St Saviour's was left to settle into a prolonged decline.

In the early modern period its tower collapsed. In the nineteenth century the roof vanished, and where the pews once stood rises a tangle of nettle, bramble and other faithful attendants of human indifference. Long sections of the flint wall have also gone and only the chancel arch, soaring now upwards to a roofless space, gives any hint of human aspiration at the site.

Wild rabbits, which would have been almost unknown in Britain when St Saviour's was first built, have riddled the remains of the chancel wall with deep holes. In my imagination I follow the animals down their burrows and where they now scratch their fleas are the earliest stones ever laid at the church. I think of the medieval labourers who placed them there and I wonder what they might have done had I told them what is now established fact: that the black flint lumps in their hands, carefully slotted into the walls layer by layer, were once sea urchins and sponges living in the warm tropical waters that stood over this spot about eighty million years ago.

16 January 2006

❧ CLAXTON ❧

Although it was not yet light I could tell that dawn was coming by the way that the headlights no longer carved their clean-edged tunnel through the darkness. And by the time I approached the river, the outlines of the bare trees were disentangling themselves from night, emerging as a greyish aura of branches around the main trunk. The only sound, bar the rush of the cold rain-laden southerlies, was a mallard quacking on the water. It sailed with the current on the sweeping meander that appeared in the half light as a grey twisting sheet of tin.

I looked north across the valley and on into the southern 'uplands' of the Broads, where Buckenham Carrs formed a dark mass on the horizon. With each passing minute the marsh landscape brightened by degrees, and while wigeon were now whistling loudly, the first real sign of daytime was a small group of black-headed gulls, their whiteness razoring an arrow formation as they angled upstream. Then the lapwings started to arrive, the tight flocks showing as thick dark lines across the sky. But the unexpected highlight of my dawn vigil was the pink-footed geese that flew towards me in several loose skeins.

The population of this goose species, which breeds predominantly in Iceland, has increased constantly in the past few years, and there are now 150,000, half the world's total, wintering in Norfolk. The occurrence of pinkfeet in the Yare Valley, including this small flock before me, is a measure of their range expansion. The skeins coalesced about midfield, and, while it may seem strange to suggest it, the first light of morning caught the pale leading edges of their wings as they came down almost vertically; and against the wider blur of their beating – one fine silvery line seeming to link to the next – they reminded me just momentarily of a spider's web frosted with dew.

18 January 2010

✧ CLAXTON ✧

Twice recently I've been asked to nominate what I consider to be the best books on nature and birds, and twice I've felt I had to pass. I believe strongly that books are reactive agents, to which our responses change over time or in relation to other books, and I don't like to try to rank what seem themselves living ecological entities. It would be like trying to choose, for instance, blackbird before ring ouzel.

But if I were forced to make a selection at gunpoint then I would have no hesitation in naming the works of J. A. Baker (1926–1987). His two books *The Peregrine* (1967) and *The Hill of Summer* (1969), published to great acclaim, are less well known today. Fortunately, Baker has undergone a recent revival with writers of all kinds, including Poet Laureate Andrew Motion and television presenter Simon King, acknowledging Baker's influence upon them. A paperback of his first book was reissued in 2005 and this year his original publishers HarperCollins are producing a hardback containing both Baker's published works and his hitherto unpublished diaries.

Baker the man was a rather elusive figure. He started birding in the late fifties and was especially active in the 1960s, cleaving strongly to a small bicycle-covered radius of sites around Chelmsford in Essex. Danbury Hill and the marshes of the Blackwater Estuary were two favourite haunts. Even in his close focus on a small territory, Baker seems to be highly relevant to our own carbon-sensitive age, providing a model of how one can find inspiration and satisfaction in a very local avifauna.

What rings clearest in his writings is Baker's decade-long fixation with one bird, the peregrine. We have to recall what seems now a very ancient past when late-twentieth-century environmentalists even feared for the global survival of this supremely dramatic predator. Baker, believing presumably that he was witness to the final act in the peregrine's great tragedy on Earth, relentlessly tracked the birds wintering in his Essex patch.

A loner by nature, Baker seems not to have forged strong links with other Essex birders and his string of records concerning peregrines in the sixties aroused his peers' suspicions. Even today, Simon Wood, author of the excellent, meticulous *The Birds of Essex*, has had sufficient qualms over Baker's peregrine records to note how the editors of the 1968 Essex bird report wondered whether he was seeing birds of non-wild origin.

The problem possibly lies in the difference between the literal truth of birders' notebooks and the literary truth as expressed by Baker. In both his works the author stripped out place names, exact dates (he gives the day and month but not the year), any reference to people, even to himself, so that it is very difficult to fix precisely the where, when, how or why of Baker's descriptions. What one is left with, however, is a sort of mythic story of quest for an almost mythic bird that has universal resonances.

The strangest and most ironic thing of all about the whiff of fraud hanging over Baker's Essex masterpiece is that the whole book is shot through with an authenticity of tone, a truthfulness to the experience of birds and landscape, that has few rivals not just in Britain but in the English-speaking

world. Anybody who has ever attempted to go beyond a mere list of birds and express something of what they feel about their encounters with wild creatures in places they know and love would profit from a literary visit to Baker's Essex. As far as I am able to judge, nobody has found a simpler, truer, more original, more precise language for these experiences than this former employee of the Automobile Association.

Here is just a sample of Baker's words. In *The Hill of Summer* he describes a churring nightjar 'breathing out the dark snake of his song to fork and flicker at the moon'. He hears the 'daffodil richness of a blackbird's pondering voice'; and, elsewhere, 'Many blackbirds sang, a rambling music, like sunlit summer rain.' How about this for trees in a gale: 'The whole wood is an exultant respiration of storm-driven wind and rain. It is like being inside the hollow bones of an immense bird, listening to the sudden inrush of the air and the measured heart-beat of huge wings.' And finally, here's Baker on the weirdness of thick-knees: 'One by one the calls of stone curlews rose in the long valleys of the downs, like fossil voices released from the strata of the chalk . . . shaping upon the darkness a stonehenge of haunting sound.'

Baker was more than a poet. He was a naturalist with supreme powers of observation and linguistic exactitude. I wouldn't want to suggest, however, that he is an easy read. He is not. The writing can be dense or slow-going. Like medicine, it needs to be consumed in small doses. But taken in the correct measure there are few tonics with the power to renew our zest for birds and nature than the glorious words of John Alec Baker.

21 January 2006

❧ HOLKHAM, NORFOLK ❧

'This is really the best place to see lions. Where you can see them how they're meant to be. Where they're in their true state. Here the lions are really wild.' I remember the words clearly.

They were English words but pronounced in that exotic, awkward, chiselled tone of the Afrikaans speaker. He was a South African professional big game hunter, working in a part of a Botswanan national park that was licensed for sportsmen to come to shoot wild animals, including a small number of lions. The licence fees were extremely high and the hunting strictly regulated, so that the revenue derived from the death of a few lions, however distasteful that may seem to many of us, helped finance the wider conservation of Botswana's wonderful wildlife. To me it seemed a reasonable arrangement, especially in a country as relatively poor as Botswana.

But the part of the professional hunter's case that I queried then, and challenge now, was the notion that only in his sector of the park were the lions really wild. I think we know what he meant. In the protected areas where they are not hunted the lion prides become habituated to a constant wagon train of land cruisers, and eventually they behave as if the intruding humans never existed, no matter how closely they approach. Yet in the shooting concession areas the lions run away at the merest glimpse of humans. However, my point would be that the lions aren't wild. In shrinking from contact with humans, the big cats are not expressing some innately hostile spirit that is fundamental to their nature. They are simply frightened – frightened for their lives. Fear and wildness, however, are not the same things.

I'm reminded of that conversation every time I visit north Norfolk in winter, because in a way the same scenario is played out on the grazing marshes around the coast. Head down the track known as Lady Ann's Drive at Holkham beach and you cannot fail to notice the huge flocks of wild geese that are spread across the fields on both sides. Or perhaps I should rephrase that, because the geese look so contented, so nonchalant about the human traffic, that a visitor could easily overlook them, assuming that they were merely wildfowl in an ornamental collection. But the pink-footed geese that are so abundant on that part of the coast are as wild as they get.

They come to us in late autumn from their breeding grounds on the east coast of Greenland, but especially from the dark lava fields of central Iceland, where they nest in sometimes dense colonies close to the mountain ice caps. Frequently they like to build their circular nest mounds of breast down and vegetation, which build up year on year, by the edge of a cliff, where the gander keeps tight watch on his brooding partner to protect her from Arctic foxes.

So when the great dark skeins of geese arrive in Norfolk I find the clamour of their beautiful, resonant, dog-like calls filled with a sense of northern wilderness. They are, it is true, without fear of the humans with whom they share the Norfolk coast because they are no longer hunted in protected areas like Holkham National Nature Reserve. But I like to think that it is not the geese that have lost their wildness, it is we who have acquired it; or, rather, we have acquired a passionate commitment to their wildness. It appeals to and fulfils something within us. The geese are, in a sense, a symbol of a reawakened reverence for life beyond our own species and outside our prescription.

The human-tolerant goose flocks of north Norfolk – no less than the sleepy and complacent lions of the Okavango national parks – express at least one success of our conservation policies. There are now 150,000 pink-footed geese wintering in Norfolk and every season those dark skeins across the sky spread their calls ever wider, partly helped by fields full of sugar beet, whose green unharvested tops have become a major part of their diet. Some of the single roost flocks coming for the night to Scolt Head Island have numbered eighty thousand. Imagine it: two hundred tonnes of feather and sinew all descending in one great rush of wings and hammering hearts. The county has become the setting for one of the great wildlife spectacles in Britain. Norfolk as a whole is now the winter destination for about half the entire global population of pink-footed geese.

The other day I caught just a small fraction of this

magnificent concentration of birds as the geese came in to roost on the marshes to the west of Lady Ann's Drive. Some were already landing in front of us and were joining the ever-expanding mass, which spread across the fields as a solid carpet of long-necked birds. But across the heavens through the entire 180-degree panorama we could see skein after skein, the nearer birds superimposed upon the more distant flocks so that the bare sky was crazed with the sequence of their lines. Order was shattered and that ever-changing vision of wing-quickenened chaos was matched by a glorious recessional of their calls that faded back into the sour north wind.

Those birds of the far north have the power to transform the atmosphere of the entire landscape. They made north Norfolk, that fundamentally humanised place, a more interesting and fulfilling country. They brought some other rare element to it and aroused a richer sense of what life can be. Perhaps it is the meeting of these two elements – the outer and the inner life – that we should really call 'the wild'.

23 January 2012

❧ CLAXTON ❧

Under the big oaks by the gate to the marsh the drizzle feels less, but the gloom is worse. The whole sky is deep pencil-lead grey, except for a slit of brighter cloud on the northern horizon. The light and the rain mean that I see the dozen or so reed buntings flitting along the dyke even more poorly than usual. They always move as I pass in staggered sequence, the nearest triggering a neighbour's flight, so that they register not as one flock, but as an aggregate of half-seen individuals. Even this understates the fragmentary nature of my daily encounters with the birds. In truth I have barely seen one whole reed bunting all winter. The lattice of willow whips along the dyke breaks them down so that they are always revealed as an angular, cubist

tangle of glimpses – a wing here, the flirting white bars of a tail there, and a head and shoulders poked cleanly from a perch as one stops momentarily to grill the intruder.

Occasionally in high spring a singing male reed bunting will stand out in full sunlight, the plum-like black head sharp within its blossom-white rosette. More typically, however, the species retains about itself an aura of self-effacement, as if it had a sense that it is too dull in colour and tuneless in voice to warrant full attention. Yet this much reed buntings proclaim loudly about our experience of nature. So many of our living neighbours – the leafless trees, the dank grasses and flowerless plants, the expiring fungi and voiceless birds – hardly ever acquire the foreground of our minds. Yet every single one of them is integral to that magical uplift in spirits, which is the great gift of a walk in wild space. Without the reed buntings we would not notice so keenly the crack in the sky and that widening pasture of blue. Nor would we feel so blessed by the warmth of that sun in our faces.

24 January 2011

✧ CLAXTON ✧

I normally find them rootling in the reeds along Carleton Beck and in this post-Christmas soft spell it makes me want to clench my fist and wave it at the heavens, as a salute to their winter survival. For the bearded tits were there all through that grinding deadness of last year's freeze.

Each day I'd see them at the same spot. One bird would suddenly let out a sharp ringing ping sound that always seemed to startle its owner as much as me. Then two birds, usually two, would shuffle up the reeds simultaneously and take me in with those fierce and faintly exotic lemon eyes, and carry on feeding. In that world of white they seemed even more beautiful: that soft dove-like blue-grey of his crown, and the rich warm ginger of their upperparts.

Even when they are buried in cover, one can follow bearded tits by that self-reassuring conversation of sharp notes. Otherwise they signal their whereabouts with mouse-like twitchings of the vegetation. Suddenly up will pop that amusing male's head with its extravagant black whiskers that look one part pantomime villain, one part Buddhist sage. The moustache is broadest around the eyes and tapers to long waxed tips either side of the throat. One detail you seldom learn from looking in the bird book is the way those whiskers actually stand proud of the facial plumage like a real moustache.

Bearded tits may carry with them a note of humour but there is nothing comic about their presence at today's sunlit lark-song-filled moment. I recall once watching these birds and in the adjacent dyke a swan, six hundred times heavier, lumbered through the ice-smearred water, progressing one painful lunge at a time so that the glass-like sheet splintered with each new effort. It was four in the afternoon. There were sixteen hours of darkness ahead. It was minus ten. Each night I asked the same thing: how on Earth did any of them make it?

25 January 2010

🐾 CLAXTON 🐾

The tiny gestures of spring are building incrementally in our parish. The first was the wheezing two-note song of a great tit, like a see-saw pivoting on its uncoiled fulcrum. Then dunnoek added a thin pleasing tinkle to the grey dawn, and this week I heard the unmistakable drumming of a great spotted woodpecker. How can anything so small and dry as this mechanical note be joyous? And yet the simple rap of a beak on dead wood, which is chosen specifically for its powers of amplification, hits the ear with enormous impact. The announcement of that emphatic 'yes' is the first moment we know absolutely that the whole panorama of life will open very soon.

A sound I love equally is a speciality of our area. Chinese water deer bark at night as a means of communication – an arc of shrill scream that bridges their otherwise solitary lives – but it also marks their season of rut. So the noise is a love note. One has largely to imagine the acts of tenderness and procreation because one seldom sees two deer in close contact during daylight hours. You normally spot them feeding right out in the middle of the marsh and safe from disturbance. Occasionally, however, you can catch them unawares. They seem extremely short-sighted and if you stand absolutely still they stare hard and quizzically, their teddy-bear ears batting back and forth to catch some scintilla of sound, their downward-pointing tusks adding a note of comic villainy to their otherwise sweet faces. Then they turn and bound away, full bottomed, bustling forward in shallow undulations as if they have to thread their bodies through small gaps in the thin air. They are not graceful. Yet there is a beautiful economy to this manner in which they drive a wedge between the breeze. With each leap and as the forelimbs touch down, that motion is followed instantaneously by a hinging upwards and forwards of their thick, powerful haunches.

26 January 2009

❧ CLAXTON ❧

I can see it now: a bird with a wingspan the length of a barn door swooping across the marshes and lifting a goose in its massive talons. The predator is a white-tailed eagle. My image of it, alas, is merely a vision. Yet the dream has moved a step closer to reality now that Natural England proposes to reintroduce the species to the Norfolk coast. It follows a number of English release projects involving ospreys and red kites. The efforts to boost numbers of the latter have been particularly successful and restored to us one of our most charismatic birds. The scheme involving the eagle, however, is a step up in terms of ambition.

The restoration of the white-tailed eagle in such a densely crowded part of Britain challenges our national tendency towards anxiety about wildness in nature. Yet, if successful, it would underscore our preparedness to share the landscape with other creatures. Because to make room for white-tailed eagles would no doubt necessitate that we slacken a little our tight grip over the countryside. We would perhaps lose a little but we might gain immeasurably.

There is opposition to the scheme even among naturalists, which is fascinating for what it says about ourselves. The arguments cluster around a perception of eagles as being synonymous with wild, remote, northern uplands. Opponents scan the ornithological texts and can find little proof of its former residence here. Yet place-name evidence and archaeological data indicate that eagles were once widespread across southern England. On the Continent, high densities of the birds occur in low-lying wetland environments very similar to East Anglia. Its present British confinement to remotest Scotland is evidence not of the bird's love for mountain scenery, but of centuries of human persecution. The restoration of eagles requires that we re-imagine the bird less as an icon of wilderness and more as our near neighbour. In so doing we will recover something wild and precious in the landscape and also something important within ourselves.

29 January 2007

☞ Nkob, Morocco ☞

It is twenty-eight years since I last visited this place, which is famous as the town with more kasbahs (fortified houses) than any other in the country. I was frustrated to find that neither the desert scenery nor the dark Anti-Atlas mountains looming way to the north roused more than a flicker of recognition. Occasionally I'd get a fleeting sense of congruence between the present landscape and some memory lost deep within me, but I never achieved any cinematic-style rerun of the past that

allowed me to appreciate here was the spot where we had done this, there was the place we had seen that.

Yet how could I forget it? From across the stony wadi, the town's outline presented a wonderful vision. A dense tessellation of camel-toned mud walls was pressed together above the brilliant greenery of Nkob's palmery. It always strikes me as remarkable how long human residence in a place allows the occupants to distil not only the most practical structures but also buildings that seem uniquely blended to their wider aesthetic context. Nkob is a classic example. Even the vegetable gardens – a complex of early crops, dividing mud walls and gushing channels of fresh water, roofed by swaying palm leaves – seemed designed with beauty in mind.

Fortunately I do have one photograph from my original visit, a print depicting two young boys taking it in turns to stand in a well and douse the other with buckets of cold water. It instantly brings back the breathless 40-degree-centigrade heat of that August afternoon, but it also dislodges one further Nkob memory: the sight of a snake, probably a cobra, zigzagging through the palm groves and the sound of birds – bulbuls and babblers – all around. On the recent cloudy morning, however, the air was deliciously cool while the only movement was the chiffchaffs sallying for gnats amid the greenery. It was deeply moving to think that in six weeks' time those same birds will be singing from the treetops in Claxton.

