

A Sky Full of Birds

By the same author:

Making the Most of the Light
Troy Town
hydrodaktulopsychicharmonica
The Elephant Tests



MATT MERRITT

A Sky Full of Birds

In Search of Murders,
Murmurations and
Britain's Great Bird
Gatherings



LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

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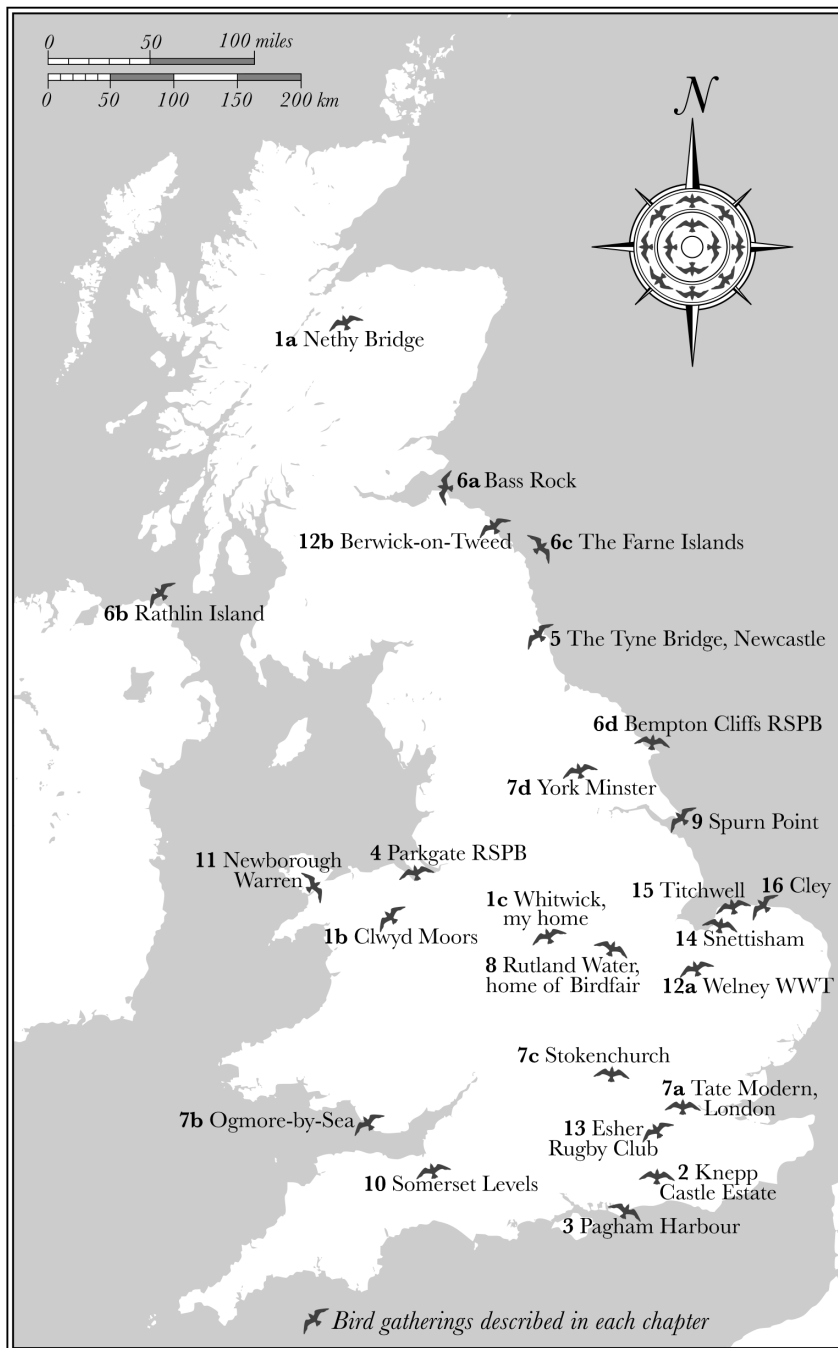


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*For Natalie, Charlotte, Jacob and all my family,
with thanks for their endless patience.*

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MAGNETITE

We are not so much of the earth,
even, as the most microscopic jewel-toothed chiton,
the single-minded sperm whale, the Atlantic salmon.
Even the birds. Especially the birds.

They are tethered by the same element
that silvers the backs of their eyes, the lodestones that stud
their skulls, or spines, while we wander song-lines, desire-lines,
remake maps, charts, the metal of our words.

Matt Merritt

Introduction

I'm on my way down the M5, heading for Cornwall in the wettest January anyone can remember. I left home at lunchtime in the middle of yet another biblical deluge, but somewhere between Strensham Services and Bristol a stiff southwesterly started to tear great holes in the dirty, grey cloud blanket, the constant curtain of spray kicked up by the juggernauts thinned, then disappeared, until now I'm driving straight into a low winter sun.

With the clearing of the skies come the birds. Through the wet West Midlands I saw nothing more than a handful of magpies, jackdaws and rooks, a few distant and unidentifiable gulls, and a couple of kestrels – once the default raptor of our motorways but now an increasingly irregular sight. The second of them, a bedraggled male hunched on an overhanging light gantry near Worcester, seemed to encapsulate the gloom that surrounds this species' status in modern Britain, not to mention my own struggle to shake off the inevitable post-Christmas torpor.

Now, however, as I approach Taunton, everything changes. Sheep pastures are spackled with straggly flocks of winter thrushes, woodpigeons and stock doves that arrow purposefully across the six lanes; finches and tits skip from bush to bush as though blown by the backwash of trucks, and buzzards flap ponderously from dead trees and fence posts. When these ubiquitous raptors find a thermal, conjured by the late-afternoon sun, they're suddenly transformed into the scaled-down eagles

they are, climbing gracefully and methodically as they use the last hour of daylight to proclaim their ownership of the sodden fields and pastures.

After two and a half hours behind the wheel, I'm ready for a break, and when a group of twenty or so starlings skims over the road I'm reminded that the Somerset Levels are among the best places in Britain to see their murmurations, the extraordinary pre-roost gatherings in which thousands upon thousands of birds perform a mind-meld of enormous proportions, each one seemingly surrendering its consciousness to a swirling, pulsating whole. Surely it's worth an hour's wandering around the lanes in search of them? Certainly it's more appealing than weak tea and ludicrously expensive cheese toasties at the fast-approaching services. I indicate left and let the 500 yards of the slip road take me into another country.



I should explain. Since the age of seven or eight, I've been a member of that much-maligned and even more misunderstood tribe – birdwatchers. Not a twitcher, you understand, the term trotted out disparagingly by the national press on the rare occasions that the world of ornithology intrudes upon their pages. Not for me midnight dashes up the motorway to catch a ferry to some bleakly beautiful Scottish island in the hope of seeing a tiny transatlantic stray that an autumn storm has thrown helplessly into our hemisphere, or teeth-chattering vigils on east coast headlands waiting to see what the winds will bring out of Siberia. No, a birdwatcher, plain and simple.

This is going to sound like stating the obvious, but a birdwatcher watches birds. They might, if they are one of those aforementioned twitchers, also tick species off a list

(or more likely several lists); hence their alternative name of listers. They'll probably compare their hauls with like-minded individuals across the country, across the globe even. They can, if they happen to work for a conservation organisation such as the RSPB, BTO or The Wildlife Trusts, or if they're one of the thousands of volunteers who make these and many smaller ornithological societies and clubs tick, turn their observations into hard science that, in the past at least, has helped shape environmental policies for governments of all stripes. Increasingly, they might squint down the barrel of a digital camera the same way the pioneering naturalists of the nineteenth century sighted their own ornithological finds down the barrel of a gun. Birds that, a hundred years ago, would have found themselves gathering dust in the glass cases of county museums, live on, bright-eyed and with every feather detail picked out in thousands of megapixels, on countless blogs and websites. But a birdwatcher watches birds. For many of us – most of us, probably – that's enough.

My own enthusiasm was fired from pretty meagre kindling – a primary school project, of which my only real memory is creating a collage picture of a then-rare osprey (little suspecting that thirty years later they'd be nesting only a few miles from that school), my mother's fondness for feeding garden birds, and occasional sightings of something unfamiliar during annual summer holidays at my nan's house in South Wales. These included a strange black and white creature, seemingly carrying a carrot in its bill, which scudded low over the beach at Rest Bay one overcast August day, which a nearby pub sign revealed to be an oystercatcher, starting my enduring fascination with wading birds.

And there were books, of course. I read anything and everything I could get my hands on, as this new obsession replaced my previous fascination with dinosaurs. No bird

had quite the same capacity to induce awe and terror as a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, of course, but I suppose my eight-year-old self made the not unreasonable assumption that any of them, even colourful rarities like the golden oriole, were far more likely to turn up in the suburban east Midlands than the ‘terrible lizard’ itself.

The local library provided *The Observer’s Book of Birds*, while birthdays delivered the RSPB’s own similar effort, along with a much heavier tome that would never, these days, get away with calling itself a field guide. Quite apart from its doorstep size, the species accounts were brief and vague, and the drawings of a distinctly impressionistic bent. There’s nothing wrong with reducing a rare passerine to a few bold pencil strokes, and these days I’d probably enjoy the same artwork in an exhibition, but to a young birdwatcher the illustrations only induced bafflement.

Finally, there was the *Reader’s Digest Field Guide to the Birds of Britain*, which would also struggle to be considered portable with its slightly odd, letterbox shape, but which mixed wonderful artwork with precise descriptions and concise but fascinating little digressions into the folklore and cultural significance of the different species. It, or at least a later version of it, is sitting there in my birding rucksack even now.

Passionate as I was about birds, it’s fair to say I was never of a very scientific turn of mind. Prior to going to secondary school, I’d heard all the scare stories from older kids about having to dissect rats and God knows what else in biology lessons, and being somewhat squeamish I dreaded it. Once I got there, however, biology sprang two genuine surprises. The first was a pleasant one, namely that dissection wasn’t on the curriculum at all, and that I thoroughly enjoyed the subject. The second, a far more disappointing turn-up for the books, was that I didn’t actually understand a great deal of it. So,

my birdwatching remained strictly un-academic, and if you'd asked me at the time I'd have struggled to tell you anything about why I enjoyed it. The truth, of course, is that it's taken me until now to even begin to understand that.

Once caught, the birdwatching bug is never quite thrown off. Even during those periods of your life when you think it's taken a back seat, you still find yourself gazing into the middle distance as you talk to someone in the street, while struggling to make out if that really was a grey wagtail scurrying across the car park, rather than the more familiar pied.

So it was with me. By the time I went to university other interests (primarily that great British hobby 'going to the pub', plus music and cricket) had come along, but they never wholly took over. And then, in my mid-twenties, living in Cardiff, working as a newspaper subeditor and suffering with a chronic back condition, I found myself walking miles each day at the recommendation of my doctor. As lovely as Llandaff and Pontcanna Fields are, they can get a bit samey when seen every day for a month, and so I started taking a pair of binoculars along to see what birds I could find. And that was it. I was a birdwatcher once again, and this time there was no going back.



That's why I find myself standing at the roadside at East Lyng on a Friday afternoon in January. My journey to Cornwall is in connection with my job as editor of *Bird Watching* magazine. As you might imagine, managing to combine that childhood love of birds with the unfortunate adult need to earn a living is something of a dream job, and if, like any area of journalism, it contains its fair share of mundanity, it also contains more than

its portion of unalloyed joy, not least in providing a cast-iron excuse for hanging around for large portions of every month while aiming my Swarovskis in the direction of feathered fly-pasts.

This particular stretch of road, as it happens, is one I know well. Any student of English history feels a sudden pang of recognition when, in East Lyng, they pass the signpost to Athelney. There, in January of 878, King Alfred of Wessex took refuge from the Danes among the marshes and thickets of the Levels, after the invading army fell upon his court at Chippenham and dispersed his household forces. The exploits that would earn him the epithet 'The Great' were still a few months away, and when he wasn't overcooking some unfortunate housewife's breadcakes you'd imagine he probably didn't have a great deal to do beyond watching the birds that thronged what was then a wetland wilderness. Although he probably ate a fair few of them too, and not just the wildfowl that still turn up on our own menus. Godwit, for example, from the Anglo-Saxon for 'good thing', is merely one modern bird name that reveals the species' past as a culinary delicacy, and a remarkable number of our native species remained on the menu to within living memory. In the terrible post-war winter of 1947, for example, even the likes of house sparrows were still being trapped to provide a mouthful or two of sustenance.

But I'm digressing. As I leave the village to the east, there are barriers across the road just beyond the last house, and signs warning of floods, but the way's still passable on foot for at least half a mile. The straight stretch of the A361 towards Burrow Mump (little more than a pimple in the grand scheme of things, but a veritable mountain in these parts) has been turned into a causeway, with the fields on both sides submerged. Close to the Alfred monument itself, on the low



hill that is the original Isle of Athelney, water pours down the gentle slope and pools beyond the hedge.

Now it's fair to say that were I living in this locality I'd probably find the floods less than fascinating. If they're in your front garden – worse, in your front room – they cease to be a novelty, a magnificent force of nature, or a once-in-a-lifetime sight, and become a nuisance, a health hazard and a heartbreaking reminder of climate change, government incompetence or the refusal to listen to the wisdom of tradition (take your pick).

But I'm passing through, and selfishly find myself enjoying the sheer strange grandeur of what's before me. The immense lake to the north is criss-crossed by hedges and fences and studded with occasional trees, giving it an appearance that, you suspect, gets rather close to what Alfred himself might have seen. Back then, the Levels would have been an almost trackless, convoluted tangle of streams and dark meres, with willow thickets and alder carr clinging to the islets rising from the murk – not the semi-tamed arable land we see today. The landscape is simultaneously expansive, with the whole sky suddenly pouring itself into a pool between two hedges, and restrictive, oppressive even. You can well understand why even Guthrum and his fierce heathen warriors would have hesitated at the thought of following Alfred into this wilderness. Ravens, perhaps, might have found enough to sustain them in the form of unfortunate people and animals fallen foul of the waters, but those marching under the raven banner would have found things a good deal less hospitable.

But the long-ago struggles of a fugitive king are soon exiled to the far reaches of my mind. And it is the birds that do the banishing. No sooner have I started walking east along the road than I stop at a sign of movement to the right. There's a patch of land, maybe half of a small field, still above water,



in the shadow of the raised causeway between East Lyng and Athelney; and as I focus the binoculars on it, I can see that it's alive with fieldfares and redwings – thrushes that pour across the North Sea to these islands from Scandinavia every winter. Such gatherings are common enough across the UK, but I've never seen them flocking quite so densely. Whatever the problems caused by the floodwaters they seem to be turning the conditions to their advantage, feeding quickly and constantly, pulling worms and other goodies from the soft ground. Every now and then the last couple of ranks in the fieldfare flock leapfrog to the front, and so the gathering moves slowly eastwards with me, utterly heedless of my presence and intent only on making the best use of what little light is left to them.

To the north, little flurries of jackdaws and rooks lift from the fields beyond the trees, and two carrion crows harangue a buzzard as it sits in silent and unmoving vigil on a dead branch. Impressive as the raptor is in terms of size, it has to take a back seat to the marsh harrier that appears from the east, gliding low with long wings held in a shallow V, tethered tight to its own reflection. Its presence provokes consternation but not alarm among the mallards, teal and moorhens dabbling in the shallower areas – they move purposefully but unhurriedly towards the nearest cover, like office workers who, on hearing a genuine fire alarm for the first time, carry out the drill they've rehearsed a dozen times.

The sounds are as impressive as the sights. There's the whistling of wigeon from somewhere out of sight, and lapwings skirl and swirl, low over the waters, before coming to rest on the long island formed by a field boundary. They bicker for the best positions, only occasionally forgetting their private rivalries to gang up on an intruding black-headed gull.

From above comes a distinctive, two-note piping, a sound that speaks to any birder of wild, wide-open places. Craning my

neck to look skyward, it takes me a good thirty seconds to find its source, even though I know what it will be. A loose group of around two hundred golden plovers flash and spangle in the last of the sun, performing their strange alchemy with every turn. At first they're dark, indistinct dots, before, banking left, they brighten into little white-hot ingots, finally turning again and falling as a rain of gold pieces.

All of this has me, for a moment, quite forgetting where I am. This sort of sight, with huge numbers of birds clinging to every square foot of dry land, every one of them intent only on its own survival, and seemingly completely oblivious to human presence, feels more like one of the world's great wetlands – Australia's Kakadu, maybe, or Brazil's Pantanal – than the fenlands of south-west England. I've been lucky enough, as part of my job, to visit such places, but this feels every bit as extraordinary.

No, more so, perhaps. For a good ten minutes I am quite literally entranced, unable to break my gaze away from this astonishing spectacle. Sporadic glimpses of lapwings' crests above the long grass just add to the exotic feel. Seen at a distance, they're chunky, pied creatures which only finally make a lasting impression when they take to the air, tumbling and falling while making a noise not unlike someone trying to tune in an old-fashioned radio. But seen close up, with the iridescent purples and greens of their backs glorious in the sunlight, and their jaunty crests visible, they're a sudden glimpse of far-off savannahs. 'So crowned cranes stalk Kenyan grass' writes the English poet Alison Brackenbury of them in the poem 'Lapwings', from her recent collection *Then* and she's right. Perhaps somewhere deep down their appeal to us is that they rekindle buried memories of our own origins in a warmer, wider continent.

When finally I do drag my gaze away from them, I realise that behind the sounds of the gathered birds, the motorway has

been keeping up its distant roar, trains have been clattering past on the way to Exeter and Plymouth, Land Rovers have been splashing through the little lake that's spreading onto the main road, and dog-walkers have been taking advantage of the lack of traffic to let their animals off the leash.

This whole extraordinary circus of avian life has been happening just yards away from all the paraphernalia of the modern world. The birds, in their way, have learned to live with it, even to take advantage of it, where they can. For all that we (quite rightly) blame ourselves for the decline of many species, we're also the reason why many of them are there in the first place.

Take the skylark, a species beloved of poets for its song and, until recently, emblematic of the downlands and open country of lowland Britain. In recent years it has undergone a worrying decline, with farming practices among the reasons blamed, but it would never have been so widespread and ubiquitous on these islands in the first place if man hadn't cleared the forests to allow sheep and cattle to graze.

Or the house sparrow, another bird that has suffered a huge drop in numbers and range in the last couple of decades. Again, our changing agricultural methods, along with modern building technology and the fashion for tidy gardens covered in decking, are blamed for what has happened, but the bird's very name suggests that it has long depended on the presence of man for both food and lodging. It must, of course, have originally managed without either, but thousands of years of living cheek by jowl have forged a complicated symbiotic relationship.

We Britons are proud of our tendency to self-deprecation. We're suspicious of anyone and anything that proclaims its virtues, its presence even, too loudly, and this attitude extends into the world of birdwatching. On the one hand that's down to necessity. We don't have the plethora of brightly coloured,

sharply plumaged birds that you find in the tropics or around the Mediterranean; so if you're going to make a habit of watching birds in the British Isles, you'd better be able to get excited at the sight of what are rather disparagingly referred to as LBJs – Little Brown Jobs.

But standing here, watching the birds swarming across every inch of the Levels that's still above water, it occurs to me that we take the same view of birds as a whole, not just the individual creatures. We see them in our gardens, or on a walk in the country, we feed them and make notes on them, photograph and paint them. Some of us even write poems about them.

Only rarely, though, do we consider birds en masse. A great many experienced birdwatchers will tell you that Britain has little to compare with the great spectacles of the bird world. We have no large-scale migration bottlenecks to compare with Falsterbo in Sweden, or Tarifa in Spain. We have no massive gatherings of majestic cranes, such as you might see in Israel's Hula Valley, or in central Europe. There are no opportunities to watch noisy crowds of gaudy, bickering parrots, as at the clay-licks of Central and South America. And what do we have as an equivalent of the crack-of-dawn explosions of colour that are the cock-of-the-rock leks of Ecuador, or Peru?

Away to the north, just about where I know the M5 must be, a little cloud of black specks is starting to form, growing almost imperceptibly with every twist and turn. For a minute or two, it struggles to take shape, threatens to fall apart under the multiplicity of different instincts and urges contained within, then suddenly attains critical mass, a point at which every starling within sight decides that, if it's to make it through the coming night, it needs to be part of it.

And as I watch a thought starts to take shape, hesitantly at first, but with growing conviction and confidence. *These*

are our spectacles. What they might sometimes (and it is only sometimes) lack in colour, size and grandeur, they make up for by being all around us on these crowded islands as we go about our everyday lives. Often all that's required for us to see them, to be a part of them, is to stand still for a moment or two, and watch, and listen. Even when there's a bit more travel involved, or a longer wait, we're not talking about day-long treks into the back of beyond, or enduring terrible privations. These are wildlife spectacles that take place within our everyday world. That depend on being part of it, in some cases.

By the time I reach the car again, my decision is made. What does a year's worth of Britain's greatest bird spectacles look and sound like? I'm about to find out.

1 The Mating Game

It starts with a singleton, of course. A solitary bird, drifting on the edge of a loose group in midwinter. It's cold, and the days are short, so there's little time to spare from the constant struggle to find food, but when the sun breaks through the scattered cloud around midday, and briefly summons up enough strength to send steam rising from the puddles along the lakeside path, the chances are that the bird's thoughts turn to other things.

One other thing, to be exact. The propagation of its own genetic material, and so the survival of the species. When you're a bird facing umpteen natural and unnatural threats to your safety (and most do), as well as stiff competition for nesting sites and food, it does to think ahead.

In the case of this particular bird, a great crested grebe, pairing off is a process that happens every year. Not for it the sort of lifelong partnerships you get with some species, such as corvids. The aforementioned competition for nest sites contributes to the instability of pairs, with the parent birds often going their separate ways at just about the same time the young leave home in late summer. They *could* end up with the same partner the following year, of course – individual birds are always likely to return to both wintering and breeding sites that they know – but it's far from guaranteed.

And that's as far as it goes, for now. A thought, no more than that, as fleeting as the flock of long-tailed tits flitting through the nearby trees (in an example of the many and

varied breeding strategies developed by birds, they will likely be a tight-knit family group). But it is a thought that will return with increasing frequency as the winter draws on. Our bird disappears beneath the dark, icy waters, back in pursuit of the fuel of life.



It's a couple of weeks later, and bitterly cold. There's a full moon jewelling the thick frost on the verges and tarmac all the way from Grantown-on-Spey. Early starts in the Scottish Highlands, even in late spring, can require layers of wool, fleece and Gore-Tex. In late January, that's doubly true.

Nobody's thinking about the temperature, though, and that's nothing to do with the noisy fan pumping heat into the hire car. Huddled beneath our beanie hats, all four of us are running and re-running half-a-dozen key ID characteristics through our minds, even though we know there's not much we could mistake for what we're seeking.

When we reach the sign welcoming us to Nethy Bridge, our silence deepens, and the tension tightens a notch or two further. We turn up through the village, into Abernethy Forest, and without being told each of us turns to stare into the pine-darkened reaches of the woods, two to each side of the car, which slows to little more than walking pace. Each time we reach an opening to one of the rides that criss-cross the forest, we stop for just long enough to satisfy ourselves that the dark shape in the middle of the track is only a fallen branch or, on one occasion, that the sudden flurry of movement is nothing more than a red squirrel.

Red squirrel! On any other day, seeing this elusive and charismatic native mammal would be reward enough for



rising long before dawn and forgoing tea and porridge at the hotel. Long since forced from large parts of Britain by the bigger, North American grey squirrel, which carries diseases the reds are helpless against, and out-competes it for food, the red squirrel hangs on in good numbers in the mountain fastnesses of Scotland, thanks in part to the presence of pine martens, which can prey easily on the heavier greys, but which the lightweight reds can escape by climbing to the furthest, thinnest branches.

What we're looking for today has an even more tenuous grasp on survival in these islands. Capercaillies are our largest game birds by some distance, with an appearance that might be described as that of a black grouse on steroids, or even a rather more handsome version of a turkey. The name, from the Gaelic, means 'horse of the woods', and gives some impression of the size of the bird, and the noise it can make. The folk names of birds are often more interesting than the official moniker, but in this case the labels 'wood grouse' and 'heather cock' sell this striking bird very short.

Males are notoriously territorial, to the extent that they've been known to attack people and even Land Rovers, and this also means they're not overly fond of living in close proximity to their own kind. Combine a low population density with a preference for habitat that is relatively rare, and you have a recipe for slow but sure extinction.

In fact, capercaillies have already been extinct in Britain once, in the eighteenth century, the result of over-hunting and the clearance of large areas of forest, before being reintroduced in Scotland in the 1830s. This population prospered to the extent that the bird again became the target of shooters. In more recent decades, hunting has ended, but deer fences and overgrazing of the forest understorey have added to the pressure on the species. The pine marten, too, might not be

helping – with no larger mammalian predators to keep them in the trees, as happens elsewhere in Europe where wolves and lynxes are present, they take the eggs of ground-nesting birds such as the ‘caper’.

All this has added up to a worrying decline, from around 20,000 birds in the 1970s, to around 1,000 now. Conservation organisations are addressing the problem, but it’s a touch-and-go situation.

But they’re surviving in Scotland, at least. Sightings are hard to come by, especially on public land and the main reserves, and private estates are often being the best places to look. But they’re out there. Somewhere.

Today we’re lucky. Sort of. A long odyssey through the forest, by road, track and narrow footpath, produces not a single male. We call in at the known lek sites – a lek being a sort of arena for the purposes of territorial posturing and sexual braggadocio – but to no effect. It will, admittedly, be easier to see them as the year draws on, yet this is still a disappointment.

But as we edge along one path around the perimeter of a little clearing, there’s a sudden flurry of movement a few yards away, and a brown, mottled shape erupts into flight, scudding low over the bell heather and bilberry, until it reaches the denser cover of the pines. The rich chestnut edges to the tail mark it out as a female capercaillie. We’re excited and relieved that at least some of the birds are around, knowing that where there are females, there should be males not too far away, and we resolve to come back another morning, soon.



To be a birdwatcher, of any level of enthusiasm or expertise, is to live your life according to a completely different calendar



to the one you grew up with. Submitting to it is no easy task, though, because it brings with it small disappointments and unexpected melancholies that can daunt even the most indomitable heart.

There's the moment, for example, some time in June, when you notice the first couple of leggy, awkward wading birds picking their way around the shores of your nearest reservoir or gravel pit. Whatever excitement you might initially feel about finding black-tailed godwits, or maybe greenshanks, is quickly diluted then dissipated entirely by the realisation that these are adult birds, whose breeding attempts in the north of the UK, or on the Arctic tundra of Greenland or Norway or Svalbard, have failed. Maybe they were among the unlucky ones that didn't even manage to pair off in the first place. But whatever the reason for their presence, they're here because there's no time, in the brief summer of the far north, for second chances. Unable to fulfil one biological imperative – the perpetuation of their species – they've moved straight on to another, the urge to move south and get first choice of the prime feeding spots for the winter to come.

Because that's what we're talking about. With the summer solstice still a few days away, autumn migration will be already underway. The world is turning far faster than we might suspect, and birds are always several wingbeats ahead of us in realising that fact.

Journalists and other media types, admittedly, might find this slightly easier to deal with than most people, given that they're used to working months in advance. After all, Christmas comes in early September, in the world of monthly magazines.

But, for birdwatchers, this whole new timescale brings with it a corresponding consolation – or rather several. The first week of March, for example, can bring the first summer visitors to Britain into the south of these islands, with the

frail, brown silhouettes of sand martins battling their way through the blustery winds like so many leaves left over from last autumn's bonfires.

Even before that, there are the first signs of new life. Right now, in the middle of this spirit-crushing second half of January, with the weather at its worst, the days stubbornly refusing to get longer, and the festive celebrations a dim memory, birds are getting ahead of the game. The indomitable robin, undaunted by winter or darkness, turns its song up a notch or two and pours its silvered notes into the cold air. Blue tits and chaffinches dart in and out of nest holes and boxes, bidding to secure the most desirable residences for raising a family. Grey herons' nests clot the top branches of bare trees, and in quarries and crags ravens return to nest sites that have been their homes since the days in which they were gods, or at least the earthly messengers of the divine. And across certain areas of Scotland, the Pennines of northern England, and the hills of North Wales, black grouse are heading to their own leks with a single, unshakeable purpose.



In many cases black grouse will have started returning to their leks in November, or even earlier. While the females only make their appearance at these sites (and black grouse are very faithful to the same leks year after year) around the beginning of March, the males gather much earlier. That's why, just a week or so after my failed 'caper' quest, I find myself in a hide looking out across Welsh moorland just before dawn. The weather – cold and crisp – is perfect, and the habitat looks just right, with forest nearby, and a scattering of individual trees intruding onto the moor.



Dawn comes slowly on a day of scudding cloud, and it takes a good twenty minutes for a succession of impressionistic pencil marks to become the fence lines of a sheep enclosure, for a shadow to become a low shrub, and for a little jungle of bushes to become the birds we came seeking, a slight rise in the temperature seeming to suddenly thaw them from their stationary vigil.

Each of half-a-dozen huddles of undergrowth gradually resolves itself into a male black grouse – or blackcock, to give them their old name – as our binoculars and scopes do their work, taking in the largely purple-black body, with white wing flashes, the lyre-shaped tail trailing behind, and the shockingly red wattles, the only real points of colour in a landscape still struggling to cope with the idea of day.

While capercaillie leks may involve a solitary male – especially these days with the population in decline – black grouse can be found in much larger numbers. In some parts of eastern Europe leks can attract more than 150 males. In the UK, a group of thirty would be considered pretty exceptional, twenty would be good, and the six we can see (within minutes two more bushes transform before our eyes) make up a more than respectable count. As we're about to find out, even eight black grouse can put on quite a show.

We hear them announce the beginning of their strange ritual. The flight call of one of their close relatives, the red grouse, coming from somewhere close at hand, seems to set them off, and all at once our amorous adventurers are strutting back and forth, uttering their own low, liquid display call, and presumably eyeing their rivals nervously. The tails are cocked and spread wide and white, making it appear as though snow has suddenly gathered in the hollows and cwms of the little plateau, while the wattles flare brighter than ever. And once or twice a bird jumps up, briefly, onto one of the fence posts, the better to survey the scene of his planned future triumph, before

returning to the ground and joining the others in their patient wait for the smaller, greyer females. It might be two months yet before the greyhens arrive, but the males will be back here day after day, displaying with greater and greater fervour, until all that bubbling and squeaking becomes a crouching, creeping parade punctuated with mock and occasionally real fights, in an attempt to gain the best positions in the lek, usually those closest to the centre. As a bird grows older, it generally has more chance of attaining this coveted spot. When you're a black grouse, experience counts for everything.

If the spectacle lacks the brilliant colour that you get with similar birds abroad, such as the two cock-of-the-rock species in South America, or the Raggiana birds-of-paradise in New Guinea, it's all the more impressive for being so open. There's no craning the neck to look into treetops, or around massive tree trunks, where black grouse are concerned.

For six months, then, this lek could be the focus of their every waking moment, and once the females arrive things really gather pace. Males dash to and fro to meet multiple opponents, and although full-blooded fights don't always result, the movement and the noise can be astonishing, with their 'rook-oo' call carrying loud and clear across the moors.

Female black grouse, it's fair to say, don't necessarily go for the nice guys. Fighting often seems to attract them, as does mating, to the extent that they'll often rush to a male who has just copulated with another female. Some males, every year, will miss out, and all that effort will come to nothing. Once it's over, the males have nothing to do with the nesting, incubation and feeding of the young, so presumably they have plenty of time to reflect on their experiences and vow to do better next time around.

Today, that's in the future. Our grouse are content to stake out the arena of their showdowns to come, pacing back



and forth carefully and measuring their opponents' worth, perhaps, in the brightness of their wattles, the whiteness of their undertails, the harsh resonance of their calls, all the time calculating if they'll be among the winners in March and April. In one respect, at least, black grouse are like birdwatchers, forced to think months ahead all the time.



Back home in Leicestershire, the only hint that spring is little more than a month away is given by the ravens up at the nearby quarry, who are already back at their sprawling nest, adding twigs to repair the damage caused by winter winds. It's cold, and snow is forecast, but they might have laid eggs already. It will be a hard struggle, if so, but there's no more resourceful bird than this biggest of British crows; and there are few birds I enjoy seeing more.

I make my way down towards the village, pausing at the little viewpoint to look across to a low, blue shadow on the western horizon. Cannock Chase. Incredible as it seems now, capercaillies were reintroduced there in the 1950s. The thought of such huge, conspicuous game birds parading around just beyond the edge of the West Midlands conurbation seems utterly ridiculous, but every now and then I'll meet an older local birder who can remember being taken to see them as a child. For a minute or two, I imagine them lekking somewhere beneath where Rugeley power station's cloud plume is currently flowering. At some stage, presumably, there must have been a single remaining male, doing his thing for fewer and fewer females, and then none, and then silence.

Oppressed a little by this thought, I make my way along what used to be a railway track but is now a footpath hemmed

in by trees and hedges, leading to the leisure centre. Beyond a playing field, I have the choice, to turn right, across a little stream and back past the cemetery to my house, or left, to walk round the little fishing lake behind the local leisure centre.

When I was a child, this latter was little more than a large, muddy puddle, part of one of the many open-cast mines or brickworks that dotted the area. When the area was eventually landscaped to form part of the leisure-centre grounds, they deepened the lake, made the banks a bit more solid, and stuck an artificial island, soon garlanded by trees, in the middle.

Wherever you go in the world, water attracts birds of all types. Waterbirds especially, of course, and it wasn't long before the lake had its own population of mallards and Canada geese, utterly used to humankind and more than willing to beg for bread and other scraps from whoever came near. The geese, in fact, can be pretty aggressive when they want to be.

Then, around 1997, when I was twenty-seven, and a year or so after I'd been born again as a birdwatcher, I was walking round the banks of this little lake while on a weekend visit back to the old town. The geese tried their luck, barring my way in a transparent attempt to extort bread, only backing off, with a hiss, at the last moment. Mallards splashed around doing what mallards do, which involves a distinctly Neanderthal approach to courtship (the unfortunate females are sometimes drowned during these distressingly violent episodes). But out on the lake, just at the far end of the island, something quite different was happening.

Two birds glided gracefully and silently through the water, one a little ahead of the other. Just a little smaller than the mallards, dark-bodied, and with long, elegant necks that instantly set them apart from any of the ducks. I walked towards them, and before I got much closer I could see an even more obvious distinguishing feature. The white face of each bird



was topped by black, backswept plumes that they occasionally raised and fanned a little, but which were generally left flat to ruffle a little in the wind, while the finishing touch was the chestnut and black ‘tippets’ that irresistibly called to mind Elizabethan gentlemen, or the elaborate costume of some medieval clergyman.

Great crested grebes. Because they were pictured in the opening pages of my field guide, I was absolutely familiar with how they looked, but while I’d seen them a few times before, way out in the middle of reservoirs usually, I was utterly unprepared to find them here.

This was more due to the long hiatus in my birding career than the bird’s actual level of rarity, or rather lack of it. Great crested grebes, you see, had quietly been staging one of British ornithology’s great comebacks. In the Victorian era, they were slaughtered in their tens of thousands for the plumage trade, with a predictably catastrophic effect on numbers. Fortunately, before it was too late, this largest of the Western hemisphere’s grebes (a family of highly specialised diving birds) became the focus of what might be the most successful conservation campaign of all time.

That might sound like an extravagant claim, given that there are still only six thousand or so pairs in the UK. But the successful efforts of a group of mainly well-to-do ladies to save this beautiful creature were to lead to something bigger than they could possibly have imagined. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was born out of it, and not much more than a century later the RSPB boasts over 1.1 million members. Large areas of the UK are owned and managed by the charity, with all wildlife, not just birds, in mind; its reserves attract new generations of birdwatchers to take up the hobby and the cause; and its members are ignored by politicians at their peril.

Six thousand pairs isn't an immense amount, but great crested grebes are never going to be as numerous as, say, mallards. Each pair needs a significant amount of water to provide food for them and their young, and they like their own space. They're widespread, rather than numerous, but that means that most people in the UK live within easy reach of places where they can be found.

Significantly, in the last few decades, they've spread into the sort of locations that, a century ago, no self-respecting great crested grebe would have even considered. Gravel pits and city centre park ponds are now just as likely to provide a home for these distinctly aristocratic-looking birds as the lakes of stately homes. That's partly due to population pressure – more birds surviving means that some will have to be a little less fussy about their habitat than in the past. But it's also, perhaps, a small tribute to the conservation-minded British public. Old industrial sites and purely utilitarian stretches of water are, more often than previously, allowed to develop a certain amount of 'wildness'. While we could still do a lot better on this count, in the case of the great crested grebe the little we have done brings with it a great bonus for the birdwatcher.

In winter, the grebes retain their sleek, elegant lines, but that collar-cum-mantle and the extraordinary tufts are nowhere to be seen. The birds occasionally gather in good numbers at such times, especially at sites such as Rutland Water, but by early spring they're back at their breeding sites.

They have particular requirements for these. Water up to five metres deep, and at least a hectare of open water per pair, while vegetation around the banks is tolerated as long as the waters aren't too narrow. The nest is a heap of aquatic vegetation, the majority of it underwater, floating and occasionally tethered to a branch or trunk, and although it'll



be concealed in reeds where possible, on occasion it will be worryingly open and vulnerable.

The leisure-centre lake, unglamorous as it was, fulfilled all those criteria. First one, then another bird, must have come across it and deemed it suitable, and the pair I saw were probably fairly recent colonists. But life is instantly easier for the birds at such a site than at a large reservoir. The lake's only big enough for one pair, and its small size means that it would take some finding in the first place, so the male has the luxury of facing no immediate competition. Female grebes, like the females of most bird species, can be fussy nonetheless. They have to be. They need to know that they're choosing a mate that will pass on good genes, and that will help them to perpetuate their own genes.

In many species this might be done by assessing the brightness and colour of the male's plumage. In others it might be by taking note of the relative size of certain parts of the plumage – in swallows, for example, males with longer tail streamers do better in the reproductive stakes, even though the streamers are a hindrance to them in the business of flying and catching insects. Known as the handicap principle, this works by the female seeing that the males with the longest tails can afford the energy and effort needed to manage such appendages.

Now, it might be a lie to say that female great crested grebes care nothing for appearances, because both sexes have a handsomeness that borders on the foppish, but when it really comes down to it what she's looking for is a good dancer. So, for that matter, is the male – everything about this species' courtship rituals is based around a perfect symmetry that's unusual in the bird world.

As I watched, back in 1997, the pair started affirming their interest in each other by swimming face to face just a few inches apart and, ironically enough, shaking their heads. After some

of the shakes, they swept their long bills elegantly through the feathers of their wings and back, as if pointing out to their potential mate the luxuriance of their plumage, or threw their heads back; throughout, their collars were puffed out into genuine ruffs. They might have been going through these moves for a few days already, weeks even, and it's the most frequently seen part of this bird's repertoire of courtship rituals.

What follows generally needs a bit of luck or a lot of persistence to see. I turned away from the lake a moment to look for the source of an unfamiliar contact call, and by the time I looked back only one bird was left. Or was it? The water in front of it rippled with disturbance, and the second grebe suddenly emerged in an upright posture that reminded me of nothing so much as a penguin, before pirouetting right in front of the other bird's face. That's a pretty neat trick, especially when you're used to seeing the far less sophisticated approach of mallards, but it's nothing to what came next.

The birds parted, and headed for the area around the island, disappearing beneath the water in turn. I amused myself by trying to guess where each would break the surface next, but tired of it, and started preparing to move on.

Then they were both visible again, maybe thirty yards apart. The clean lines of their heads and bills were marred somewhat by the tangle of green, dripping weed that each had pulled out from the lake-bottom, but grebes know how to turn an unpromising prop to their advantage. They turned towards each other and started swimming at considerable speed.

Just as it appeared a collision was inevitable, each of them rose into a sharply vertical posture, white breast to white breast, presenting the underwater vegetation to the other with the eternal optimism of the hopeful lover.

I know. Anthropomorphism is a sin, but it's hard to resist when it comes to great crested grebes. Maybe it's the



very concept of birds dancing, the pavane-like nature of their processional courtship curiously appropriate to their Elizabethan appearance. Or maybe it's the fact that, as previously mentioned, both male and female have to make an effort, and that appeals to us in these enlightened times. Being able to see a performance such as theirs on the most unpromising of waterholes just adds to its beauty and sheer strangeness. Out in the wilds you come to expect that sort of thing. Confronted with it round the back of a corrugated steel leisure centre and two small business parks, on a drizzly Wednesday morning, you can be briefly convinced that all the luck in the world is running your way.

Finally, there's a second great pleasure that comes from finding that great crested grebes are nesting on your local lake. It would be pushing it a little to call it spectacular, as such, but it very definitely scores very highly on the cute-o-meter (and don't believe even the most steely-eyed twitcher when they say that they don't do cute). The baby grebes, when they hatch, are tiny, fuzzy, black-and-white striped creatures, which resemble nothing quite so much as a mint humbug that's been left in a coat pocket too long and has picked up all the fluff of a dozen tumble-dryers. And if that isn't enough to reduce you to a bleary-eyed, cooing lump of jelly, their handsome parents also have the endearing habit of swimming around with the photogenic youngsters nestling on their backs. Grebes are the gift that just keep on giving.



If birdwatching instantly teaches us something about time, the seasons and the artificiality of man's calendar, it quickly follows that up by convincing us that everything we know

about geography is wrong. Britain, we're always being told, is a small island; however, while it's true we have neither the area nor the extreme variation in habitat of, say, the United States, we have more than enough to spring surprise after surprise. When I started work at *Bird Watching* magazine, for example, in an office block perched on the edge of the Cambridgeshire Fens, I was astonished to find that marsh harriers, a bird that I've seen only once at home, less than fifty miles away, were ten a penny there.

Nowhere did such diversity of habitat become more obvious than on my first winter trip to northern Scotland. We spent a day birdwatching along the Moray coast, between Inverness and Lossiemouth, and despite fierce, stinging cold winds, saw all manner of wonderful birds. There were sleek divers of all shapes and sizes, riding low in the water and butting the waves like the battle fleets that once steamed out of Invergordon. Fire-eyed Slavonian grebes, subtly beautiful and mysterious even in their non-breeding plumage. Great rafts of eiders, their rather clumsy, clunky appearance completely at odds with the image of supreme softness their name instantly conjures. Gannets wheeling and diving at the far edge of sight. I drank in the experience of finally seeing, in the flesh, page after page of my field guide brought to life, pages that I'd never needed in my Midlands hometown.

As the light started to fade, we stared down our scopes into the wide expanse of Findhorn Bay, its mudflats twinkling yellow then white as a dense mass of golden plovers turned away from the wind. Other waders picked their way around the water's edge, a few pintails swam in the shallows, and gulls loafed, as gulls do. It was a good way to end a great day, but the excitement wasn't yet over, or at least not for our guide, Alex.

He began to make the sort of noises that birdwatchers do when something really exciting comes along. A sort of low-

frequency muttering, accompanied by increasingly frantic movements of his binoculars and scope. I and the other two birdwatchers with us tensed, wondering which rarity was going to be announced to us imminently. King eider? Brünnich's guillemot? Maybe even a white-billed diver?

'Got it!' said Alex, glancing up at us with a look of quiet triumph. The tension was unbearable, but the silence remained unbroken. I decided to take matters into my own hands, and put my eye to the scope.

There, picked out in all the gloriously crisp, sharp detail that the best Austrian optics can provide, was a single great crested grebe. Its plainer winter plumage did it no favours, and for a moment I was wondering just what else had sparked Alex's excitement. And then I understood. Up here, the grebes are scarce enough to qualify as a great bonus tick to round off a highly productive day.

The incident set me thinking about the whole concept of ticking off lists of the birds we see, but mainly about how what we think of as Britain's birding landscape is in reality a mosaic of different habitats and ecosystems, inextricably linked and ever-changing, yet separate and distinct at the same time. It could, conceivably, leave you dispirited at how you'll ever get to grips with the variety of wildlife that's out there. Or – and I can't recommend this highly enough – it could convince you that getting to know your own little corner of the world inside out is a worthy aspiration for any naturalist, and one that will take you at least a lifetime to fulfil.

2 Bowing with the Beautiful

I dream of birds. Sometimes, the experience is so vivid that I wake excited at the myriad new and strange species I've seen, only to face disappointment, moments later, when realising they were merely a strange trick of the memory.

That said, it has occurred to me that I could always keep a list of the birds I've seen purely in dreams. The most memorable, I think, were the flock of half-a-dozen black wheatears – a gorgeously dapper species found in the Iberian peninsula – that turned up in a back garden similar, but not identical, to my parents'. The unlikeliness of such an encounter made no impression on my subconscious. Neither did the subsequent appearance, in the same garden, of a full-sized polar bear. I finally woke with a start, and with the melancholy feeling that a great sighting had escaped me.

But a different type of bird dream comes to me, too. It can start in February, on still, windless nights, but it really makes itself known in April, when warmer temperatures make sleeping with the window open possible, or even necessary.

It can start when sunrise is still little more than an idea. Somewhere in the east, the sky's lowest fringes are just beginning to bleach out, although you'd be hard pressed to tell if that was down to the coming sun, or the sodium glow of the cities of the East Midlands.

A thin, silvery voice speaks to my sleeping self of forests and rivers, of heath and hedgerow, of park and garden and the unloved, unlooked-for spaces that punctuate our everyday



lives. I hear it and straight away I'm wondering, and wandering in search of its source. I know the voice belongs to a bird, striking up its song, but I know nothing of what it is, or what it's trying to say to me. I only know that it has the beauty distinctive to anything that is utterly and indefatigably itself, and that I want to hear it more loudly and clearly, and see the singer.

But the instant I move off after it, there's another voice, and another, similar yet distinctive, and then finally another altogether, a stronger, more confident, but melodious and soft voice. It's as if this voice is speaking a different language to the first, although perhaps one that shares a common origin. Welsh to the former's Breton, perhaps. And then it too is joined by another similar voice, and another, and all the voices heard so far are raised a notch higher as a fifth, sixth, seventh and seventeenth song-language join the babel of tongues battling to be heard.

The dream-me who hears all this eventually gives in to the inevitable, and lets the torrent of song wash over and through him. The song speaks of distances and journeys and of other voices heard along the way. It talks of renewal and rebirth. It is energising, and cleansing, and I open my eyes from the dream to realise it has become a part of my waking self, and that spring is once again sprung.

It's a dream you can have, too.



Most of us recognise a few bird songs, at least. The cuckoo's disyllabic public service announcement that spring has arrived. The tuneful, rhapsodic performance of the blackbird, from atop the TV aerial of your house. The silvery strands of

the robin's broadcast, flung upon midwinter snows and balmy spring evenings alike. The suburban jangle of the chaffinch.

But there's more, so much more. The dawn chorus – that sudden outpouring of song to greet the coming of daylight – is found all over the world, but a lucky combination of factors makes Britain's chorus better than most. Than any, some would say.

For a start, we have four very distinct seasons, which means that mating and breeding are concentrated into a relatively short space of time. In warmer climes, these can go on for much longer. Here, in addition to establishing and maintaining a territory, songbirds have to attract a mate (or re-woo last year's) within the few short weeks that occur from late winter through to late spring. They can't afford to waste time, because in many cases the food that their nestlings need will only be available during a narrow window of opportunity; and they might also be hoping to raise more than one brood. Any delay risks them getting behind schedule, or even missing out on breeding altogether.

For another thing, we have a dawn chorus that builds gradually but steadily, from a single species singing in the middle of winter, to scores lifting their voices in spring, bolstered by the arrival of migrant songbirds – primarily but not exclusively warblers – from the southern hemisphere.

So, in the darkest days of winter, you'll hear little in the way of song. Birds still *call*, but that's completely different. A call is a way of alerting other birds to the presence of a predator (or to your own immediate presence) or, who knows, to the discovery of a food source. It's functional, and so is short and sharp and not necessarily sweet.

A song has another dimension entirely. It has a functional element, certainly – the singer is to some extent saying 'I'm here' as loudly as possible, in the hope of scaring off rivals and



earning the admiration of a mate. But it's also saying 'I'm here' in a much more metaphysical sense, announcing to the world the singer's entire reason for being. Not for nothing are they called songbirds.

Robins are the first to break into song each morning, and perhaps this explains the lasting British affection for this species as much as their bright-red breasts and their confiding nature do. The male and female hold separate feeding territories at this time and both sing from the middle of winter; in other British species it's the male that does most if not all of it. Robins are, despite their somewhat cuddly reputation, extremely aggressive when they need to be – which is a lot of the time – and that sweet song is just one of the weapons in their armoury, used to try to ward off rivals.

Significantly, the midwinter song of the robin is a more understated, subdued and plaintive version of their spring symphony. The birds know it's serving a slightly different purpose, and they also know they don't have to be quite as loud – there are no other singers to compete with.

Most, if not all songbirds, also have a quieter, more muted version of their song, known as a subsong, which they use as a sort of warm-up for the main event. So, if you were to find the wintering grounds of, say, a UK-breeding blackcap, which lie south of the Sahara, you'd hear these sweet songsters tuning up for the breeding season ahead. And perhaps just before they leave for Northern Europe you'd hear their subsong segue seamlessly into the full song, now perfected.

In the earliest days of spring, then, the dawn chorus can take some hearing. Subsongs are whispered from bushes and trees, and although there's a slowly gathering volume and intensity to the music it's got a long way to go before it reaches its full glory.

The trigger for the full performance, as with so many things in the world of birds, is a change in light levels, imperceptible

to us but as obvious as a motorway sign to the singers. On a certain day in early spring – and it will vary according to the latitude you're at, as well as the local habitat and weather conditions – a song becomes a duet, becomes a chorus.



British birdwatchers are an affable, helpful lot, but you still get the occasional squabble between twitchers, questioning the authenticity of each other's lists or the validity of the latest sighting; and every now and then a row will break out over an alleged incidence of suppression, when a record of a particularly interesting bird is kept from the general birdwatching public by those in the know. The finders might have a good reason for this, such as wanting to protect a nest site, but it rarely happens without a dust-up.

Most of the time, though, to meet another birder in the hide, or on the path through your local reserve, is to be assured of a cheerful 'good morning', followed by a recitation of their most recent birdwatching triumphs and woes, and then detailed directions to the best birds nearby. Sometimes, they'll even accompany you, especially if the birds in question are at all rare, even at a local level. It's not unusual in the world of birding to find yourself making polite conversation with a stranger standing on some puddly, muddy cart-track miles from anywhere, waiting for an unobliging passage migrant to turn up and make everybody's day worthwhile. And therein lies something of a problem. Because, for many of us, most of us, even, birdwatching is essentially a solitary pursuit.

The reasons for this are many. It has something to do with the way that, while popular, it is not *that* popular. You could walk into any pub in the UK and reasonably expect to strike up

a conversation about football, but fellow birders, and especially fellow birders of roughly equivalent interests and abilities, are rather thinner on the ground.

It has something to do with the image birdwatching has always had. Not out and out negative exactly, but definitely nerdy and slightly comical. Not many birdwatchers have been in a hurry to proclaim their love of the subject to the rest of the world.

But there's something else. Birdwatching, in some respects, is just a replacement activity for the hunting that we'd all have engaged in once. This is at its most obvious when you see full-on twitchers looking to 'bag' another tick, but an element of it is there with the most casual of birdwatchers, too. Getting a good look at even the commonest of birds means learning a certain amount of stalking and fieldcraft. In the same way as with the hunter, it pays to learn your quarry's habits and routines.

But more than that, part of the appeal of birdwatching for myself, and I suspect many people, is that it's a good cover for another activity generally derided by Britons – spending time on your own thinking about things. We're not, in Britain, overly given to self-reflection. We look with suspicion upon the willingness of Americans to go to psychiatrists. Meditation is still viewed by many as belonging to the exotic East. Philosophy is for the Greeks. Or is it the French? Birdwatching, along with that other great British outdoor pursuit – walking the dog, is as close as some of us get to being able to consider the big questions in life, to commune openly with something much larger than ourselves, without frightening the neighbours.

That was how it started, or restarted, for me. I've mentioned how, when I lived in Cardiff in my twenties, birdwatching gave me an incentive to get out on a long walk each day, with all the hoped-for benefits for my bad back, and the more I did it the more I rediscovered my love of birding. But the walking itself

was important, too. It might sound obvious, but walking takes time, time that we're otherwise not inclined to give ourselves in the middle of our busy lives. I found myself thinking longer, and harder, about all sorts of things. I worked out what I wanted to do in my life, and where I wanted to be. I even started writing poetry, for heaven's sake.

Around five years ago I decided to do all my birdwatching for the following year on foot, with the intention of writing a feature for *Bird Watching* about it. While I wasn't a big twitcher or lister, I had nevertheless got into the habit of driving from one birdwatching site to another, within a twenty-mile radius of home.

Replacing that habit with a strictly pedestrian routine saved me an awful lot of petrol, helped me shed three stone in weight, and reminded me that walking, and birdwatching, can be therapy for a troubled, or simply tired, mind.

But the change of routine had an effect on my birding as well. As I walked between places I started to notice new things about the behaviour of even the most familiar species. I started to pay attention to the marginal, less obvious habitats in between the reserves and the parks and gardens and farmland. Above all, I started to realise just how much of birdwatching is actually bird-listening. And once learned, it's a lesson that enriches your birdwatching experience more than you could ever have dreamed.



It's early April, and I'm down at Gracedieu Woods, a mile or so from home. I carry out a woodland bird survey here once a month, so I'm planning to use this opportunity to 'get my ear in' ahead of a trip to one or two dawn chorus hotspots.

It's cold, and as I walk the first few yards into the trees, still dark. At least, it seems that way to me, but somewhere a bird has detected a thinning of the gloom and decided to salute it the only way it knows how. A robin, of course, spinning the silvery thread of its song out across the understorey of this deciduous wood, a remnant of the original Charnwood Forest.

I stand and listen. There are more robins, further in, and in no time at all blackbirds are joining in, with their strong but sweet, fluty tones. They effortlessly run through intricate variations on a theme, with an effect that's as close to what we recognise as music as any British bird achieves.

But if blackbirds are the classical musicians of the British scene, then song thrushes are the jazz improvisers. Their habit of singing short, distinctive phrases loudly, clearly and two or three times over has long been noted; Robert Browning's poem 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' highlights the quality:

That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture.

There are two things to note at this point. One is that all the birds singing so far are species that rely, for the most part, on worms and other creatures of the forest floor for their food. These food sources can reasonably be expected to be around even now, when the sun is just a rumour beneath the eastern horizon. That old saying about 'the early bird catching the worm' is perfectly correct, and so our robins, blackbirds and song thrushes are setting out to establish territorial rights as early as possible, ahead of what could be a day of considerable friction between competing males.

The other point to note is that the singing of the song thrush generally increases in complexity as the season goes on, and as the years go by, because like all the best jazz musicians it has



no qualms about appropriating a phrase here, a riff there, from other birds. And not just the birds in its immediate vicinity, either. I've stood outside my house on a warm May evening and listened to a song thrush on a leylandii repeating the two-note call of the curlew over and over. There are curlews a few miles away, but very few, so perhaps it picked up this neat trick when migrating curlew passed over; or perhaps the thrush spends its winters on one of our warmer coasts, where it's in close proximity to the large waders.

This habit of cutting and pasting the songs of other birds into your own is probably given its fullest expression by the marsh warbler. Like most of its family, it's a rather unprepossessing bird to look at – a Little Brown Job if ever there was one – and it's not easy to find in the UK, being confined mainly to Kent and parts of Worcestershire where it can find its preferred habitat of rank, seasonally flooded vegetation.

Whatever the marsh warbler lacks in looks, though, it makes up for with the ingenuity and virtuosity of its song. During his first year, on the breeding grounds in Europe and Asia, the wintering grounds in south-east Africa, and all points between, each male picks up the songs of around seventy-five other species, then splices them together into a single symphonic whole. Each song is different, of course, because no two birds will have heard exactly the same species, and intriguingly each male also sticks to what he first learned, with no extra snatches of song added after the first year. Every male is a living history of its own first year of life, compelled to tell you the same anecdotes about its travels over and over again.

The marsh warbler arrives in the UK late, compared to our other summer visitors. Sometimes it's June before it turns up, but the other members of this large family start to trickle in from mid-March. Some, indeed, stay here throughout the

colder months, eeking out a living. Dartford warblers do so in the dense gorse and brush of (mainly coastal) heaths, while Cetti's warbler, a recent colonist with an unmistakable, explosive song, skulks deep within reed beds and damp scrub. Blackcaps, on the other hand, have adapted to garden feeders to get through the cold months, while chiffchaffs hang around sewage works and farm buildings, especially in the south-west, looking for insects.

As I stumble a little further into the wood, one of the latter starts up with his insistent, two-note song, and is answered by yet another, further in. It's not so much a duet as a shoot-out, of course, and no other chiffchaffs yet feel inclined to argue the toss. Instead, there's a gathering cacophony of great tits – some of them using a two-note song not unlike the chiffchaff – and finch-song: the quiet, understated warbling of bullfinches, the light, metallic tinkling of goldfinches, the wheezing and twittering of greenfinches, and the descending jangle of the chaffinch.

Studies have shown that the chaffinch's song varies subtly from place to place, although not so much that a birder could necessarily tell the difference. These 'dialects', it's thought, serve the purpose of preventing inbreeding: female chaffinches learn to listen for a song significantly different from what they've heard from their fathers and male siblings.

By the time I've tried and failed to decide whether there's any difference between the songs of the chaffinches here and those at work, the sun is clear of the Charnwood hills, and the temperature is noticeably a few degrees warmer. The snap and crackle of twigs overhead betray the busy presence of grey squirrels, and the warm light filtering through the branches and budding leaves spotlights one, two, three and finally a loose crowd of small grey-brown birds perched on the edge of the small clearing, each ducking in and out of cover in turn.



Like a band in a studio overlaying old tracks on new to build up a single piece of music, we have the final layer of song.

Blackcaps chortle closest at hand, and a little further away, perhaps provoked by them, there's the very similar rippling, babbling song of the closely related garden warbler. For a moment it rivals the sweetness of the former's outpourings, but the irresolute ending, lacking the blackcap's emphatic flutyness, is like the unsatisfying fade-out of a radio edit of a great song, rather than the drums and power chord full-stop of the album version.

Soon willow warblers are joining in, too, their song like a sadder, thinner and more affecting version of the chaffinch's; and from away on the edge of the wood there's the excited, scratchy jibber-jabber of the whitethroat. It takes all these insect-eaters a while to join in, because they have to wait until their prey starts fluttering around to feed, but once they do they're impossible to ignore.

I listen for as long as my aching back and the pressing need to go to work will allow, then walk slowly home. If I was being churlish, I might reflect upon what I didn't hear – no redstart, or pied flycatcher, no 'spinning sixpence' song of the wood warbler. No purring turtle doves. No cuckoo, even, although I might at least hear one of them at Gracedieu before the spring is out.

But I'd also have heard a quite different but equally wonderful dawn chorus had I gone a couple of miles in any direction. Up on the more open spaces of Charnwood Forest, I could have expected yellowhammers jangling out their 'little bit of bread and no cheese' song from telephone wires, skylarks exulting from somewhere high above the heaths, and curlews delivering their ecstatic, bubbling trill as they glide over sheep pastures.

While the majority of passerines – that biological order of birds commonly, albeit somewhat inaccurately, known as

songbirds – probably fall into the soprano bracket, contralto at deepest, there are even deeper ‘songs’ out there. The low, insistent throb of the bittern’s ‘boom’, for a start, a bassline familiar to anyone living around the fenland and marshes of East Anglia and, thankfully, increasingly far-flung areas of the rest of the UK (a pair have bred at Attenborough, on the edge of Nottingham, as I write).

But wherever you are in the UK, whatever you’re hearing, the phenomenon of the dawn chorus is extraordinary. Extraordinary in its range, its volume, in the way that each song seems to find its own space, its own frequency. And extraordinary in the fact that it will all happen again tomorrow, and tomorrow, until breeding is done for another year.



Having made the case for the glory of the dawn chorus, I’m bound to point out that birdsong in Britain can be wonderful at any time of day – it’s just that you won’t find quite the same intensity and range as you do at first light, when most of the male birds in these islands, along with a few of the females, are intent on announcing their continued existence, their health, vitality and virility, their possession of a desirable territory and/or residence, and their availability for intimate liaisons.

If there’s another time in the day that does approach dawn as a good time to listen to birdsong, it’s dusk. Many of the principles are the same – the birds are taking their last opportunity to send their aural CV out to prospective partners and rivals, before they settle down for the increasingly short night.

Blackbirds and song thrushes are particularly fond of indulging in a little twilight serenade, with the former also

prone to greeting the approaching darkness with their persistent ‘chink, chink’ alarm call. Other small birds, such as blue tits, also sing late. And others, such as the grasshopper warbler, take centre stage at the dimming of the day, pouring out their strange, mechanical ‘reeling’ song (like a bicycle freewheeling or a fishing reel being played out) just as everything else is falling silent.

Other songs mainly heard at dusk and into the hours of darkness also tend to have similarly strange qualities – the vaguely mechanical ‘churring’ of nightjars, the corncrake’s call, a recitation of its scientific name of *Crex crex* which has been likened to running your fingernail along the teeth of a comb, or the eerie wailing of the goggle-eyed stone-curlew. Add the hooting and screeching of owls, and there’s still plenty to listen to once the sun has gone down.



But there are out and out songsters who sing in the hours of darkness, birds that are the subject of one of the most persistent cases of mistaken identity in British birding, and one of them is in grave danger of disappearing from our islands altogether.

I’ve never been described as a party animal, and New Year’s Eve is rarely a big deal for me, not least because, for many years, I’ve spent it preparing to get up early on New Year’s Day on a quest to see the year’s first birds. But a few years ago, I decided to celebrate with friends at a restaurant in Leicester, and after seeing in the New Year on the little dance floor (strictly eighties disco hits), I went outside for a breath of fresh air.

As I stood amongst the smokers and taxi-seeking couples, at 2 a.m. on a freezing morning, I could hear the unmistakable



sound of a robin singing. A quick scan around revealed the singer, perched in the top of a rowan tree in a nearby car park, carolling the revellers on their way home.

Look up this phenomenon online and you'll find plenty of suggestions that robins sing at night because street lights create an artificial daylight that triggers their song response, and their night-time singing is the result of increasing development and urbanisation. While this can't be strictly true, as accounts of robins singing at night date back well into the nineteenth century, including in R.D. Blackmore's 1869 novel *Lorna Doone*, there's little doubt that the absence of genuine darkness in our towns and cities has had some effect and led to an increase in incidences, while another urban factor – noise – also seems to play a part. Robins, research suggests, have cottoned on to the fact that they're far more likely to be heard in the hours of darkness, when towns and cities are quieter.

Widespread and well-documented as this habit is, it's not common knowledge, which means the casual, non-birding listener tends to identify these nocturnal singers as the one species that everyone knows sings at night; a species that is, indeed, defined by it – the nightingale.

The name 'nightingale' is Anglo-Saxon in origin and means 'night songstress', as it was assumed the female did the singing, although it's the male – specifically, the unpaired male – that does so. The nightingale's endlessly inventive mixture of whistles, trills and gurgles is both astonishingly pure and extremely loud; in Spain, where the birds are widespread and numerous, their name is 'ruisenor' – literally, 'the noisy man'. The volume is required because these lovesick bachelors are, initially at least, trying to attract passing females who are flying over their territory on migration, and later to gain the attention of those unpaired females scattered around the countryside.

Let's return to our city-based, night-time serenaders. The nightingale is not given to frequenting urban environments. It might, conceivably, find something to its liking in one of the larger, wilder city parks, such as London's Hampstead Heath – but as for the small, manicured rectangles of greenery that punctuate our cities and towns, the roundabouts and verges and central reservations of our ring roads, and the gardens of our homes? Forget about it.

This fact was acknowledged by Eric Maschwitz and Manning Sherwin, writers of the song 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square', a great favourite during the Second World War. The song's whole point, of course, is that the singer is willing to believe all manner of unlikely things could have happened on the magical evening he met his beloved: a nightingale singing in London's West End is every bit as implausible, the song suggests, as angels dining at The Ritz.

The war also, incidentally, provided a remarkable example of the power of birdsong to transcend even the most trying of circumstances. Since 1924, the BBC had been broadcasting, and selling recordings of, the renowned cellist Beatrice Harrison as she played her cello in her garden in Oxted, Surrey to the accompaniment of the nightingales singing there.

In 1942, the broadcast was going ahead as usual, when the microphones started to pick up the drone of approaching aircraft: RAF bombers on the way to attack Mannheim in Germany. As the menacing noise grew louder, so too did the singing of the birds, determined to be heard no matter what. Concerned that any Germans listening in might get warning of the coming raid, a sound engineer abruptly pulled the plug, and radios fell silent across Britain.

To hear the recording now is extraordinary; the nightingales are both a reminder that life – the life of the natural world – carried on as usual despite the tragedies engulfing Europe, as



well as being a symbol, perhaps, of the idealised Britain that was being fought for. It's difficult to listen to it without choking back a tear. But birdsong of all sorts can have that effect. Somehow, rather like poetry, it slips past the brain's rational gatekeeper, and attaches itself directly to the emotional core instead.



On a cool evening later in April, I'm at the Knepp Castle Estate, in the West Sussex Weald, where a rather extraordinary rewilding programme is offering new hope that the nightingale won't fall silent in the UK altogether.

The purity and volume of the nightingale's song are partly due to the fact that the sound needs to carry as far as possible in the nightingale's very particular habitat – coppiced woodland of a particular age, and scrubby thicket of a particular structure, in which they sing from the most impenetrable parts. The lack of such a habitat is one of the reasons why the nightingale has struggled to thrive in Britain in recent years, with only an estimated 6,500 males present each spring and summer, down from perhaps half as many again in the mid-1990s; moreover, the bird is also near the northern edge of its range in West Sussex, with most nightingales confined to the south-east of Britain and East Anglia.

Global warming could play a part in reversing recent declines and extend that range northwards; but in the meantime there are success stories. Paxton Pits, a nature reserve next to a working gravel quarry in Cambridgeshire, is a renowned hotspot, and other old gravel pits are similarly attractive to the birds, because once these areas have been returned to nature they develop at a certain point into exactly the habitat that the nightingales are looking for.

Significantly, both of the nightingale's preferred habitats are very transient. As coppiced trees age they shade out the plants beneath them, leaving the ground-layer too open for nightingales; and a similar thing happens with scrubland. Without the right kind of management to maintain them these habitats disappear – and so do the nightingales.

At Knepp there's an ambitious attempt to use large herbivores to drive landscape changes, with cows, deer, horses and pigs helping to create a mosaic of habitats, including open grassland, regenerating scrub, bare ground and forested groves. Nevertheless, even here there's a recognition that the nightingales will come and go – areas that are good for them one year will eventually be good for other species, while the nightingales will move on in search of their very precise needs. There's a requirement, then, across the country, for new sites to be constantly provided.

Despite their name nightingales do also sing during the day, and on our initial tour of the estate, a good hour-and-a-half before sunset, we catch a couple of snatches of song – remarkably far-carrying on the still air. I begin to understand why this bird has haunted the imaginations of tortured artists and poets for centuries: there's a truly musical beauty to the song, but there's also the resonance added by the apparent hopelessness of their quest (just how likely is a female to be passing?), and the knowledge that any particular nightingale we hear might be gone next year, to another site that meets its very precise requirements.

There's also the sense of time and place that the bird's singing evokes. To hear a nightingale song is to be instantly transported to an evening-time English woodland between mid-April and early June, with all its smells and sounds and sights. Damp earth, and wild garlic, and the new leaves rustling and, here and there, holding on to little pockets of



the heat of the day. Bluebells, of course, impossibly, violently violet, pooling around your feet as though the sky has seeped down through the canopy.

It's that way with all birdsong, and perhaps it's one of the reasons why it, and so much of birdwatching generally, can be best appreciated alone. It awakens the poet and artist in all of us, and permits, no compels, us to take a look inside ourselves.



To hear the nightingale singing in the depths of the night is what really sends a chill down the spine. It's this experience, surely, that has made it such an iconic bird in Western literature and music.

Homer was the first to mention it, in *The Odyssey*, in connection with the myth of Philomela and Procne (Philomel was later used as an alternative name for the bird); and both the Ancient Greek playwright Sophocles and the Roman poet Ovid also wrote their own takes on the myth, in which one of the pair (versions vary) is turned into a nightingale – for that reason, the song was interpreted as a lament, although it's far from the most melancholy of bird songs.

Later poets, from Chaucer – in a poem called 'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale', which acts as a prelude to his longer work *The Parliament of Fowls* – right down to T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* used the same story, while others, including Shakespeare, have tended to use the bird as a symbol of themselves and their own art, with the Bard writing in Sonnet 102:

Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
When I was wont to greet it with my lays;
As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
And stops his pipe in growth of riper days ...

By the early nineteenth century, when the Romantic movement was in full swing, the nightingale was again being co-opted by men with time, pens and paper on their hands, representing nothing less than the voice of nature itself. Shelley, in his 'A Defence of Poetry', wrote:

A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' similarly portrays the bird as the poet himself would have liked to have been perceived – as the creator of a deathless music that lives on long after him. However, at least one of Keats's contemporaries might have wondered if the bird that inspired the writing of the poem (in Hampstead) was really a nightingale at all. Even if it was, he'd certainly have objected to the way Keats used it largely symbolically, emphasising the effect of its song on him.

That man, John Clare, was the son of a farm labourer from Helpston, Northamptonshire. Almost entirely self-taught, he pursued a number of menial occupations, but also wrote poetry from an early age. After being published by the same company that published Keats, he was for a time a literary sensation. Clare's main subject was the natural world, and the threats he saw being posed to it, especially by the enclosure of common land. Feeling alienated both from literary society and the agricultural workers he'd grown up with, he spent long hours wandering the countryside around his home, and writing about the wildlife he found there, which he described with the skill of one who knew it well. During the last fifty years, his reputation has gradually grown again, with his factual, first-hand and utterly unsentimental approach apparent in the

work of poets such as Ted Hughes, as well as in the writings of many nature writers.

It's still possible to hear nightingales singing in good numbers at Castor Hanglands, a nature reserve within sight of the spire of Helpston Church, so perhaps not surprisingly they cropped up again and again in Clare's writing. In 'The Nightingale's Nest' for example, he writes:

Of summer's fame she shared, for so to me

Did happy fancies shapen her employ:
But if I touched a bush, or scarcely stirred,
All in a moment stopt. I watched in vain:
The timid bird had left the hazel bush,
And at a distance hid to sing again.

I find myself thinking of these lines at Knepp. After a lull at sunset and the first ninety minutes or so of darkness the nightingales have started up again, always seemingly just beyond the next hedge, or just over the next rise, always leading us further into the night.

Nevertheless, it's exhilarating to stand there in the dark, ears straining for the next sound. Occasionally there's the distant hooting of tawny owls, and once the screeching of a barn owl, but otherwise the silence is all the deeper for the confidence and élan with which it's shattered every now and then by the nightingales, just as every note of their songs (and the number they pack into each one is astonishing) is thrown into sharper relief by the stillness that surrounds them. The nightingale, like all the best musicians, knows that what you leave out is just as important as what you put in.

I wait until the cold and a pressing appointment first thing in the morning have grown too much to ignore, then head home in the knowledge that the nightingales will be singing

right through until dawn. Indeed, dawn and dusk chorus are alike to them – and so is everything in between. They're not, if I'm honest, my favourite British songster – the humble blackbird would win that accolade – but I defy anyone to hear just one nightingale and not feel that they've been touched, for a moment, by the poetry of nature.

3 Out of Africa

It's a bitterly cold Sunday at the end of March, and I'm about to indulge in one of my rare bouts of twitching. A lesser scaup, a North American duck, has somehow been blown right across the Atlantic and come to rest in the middle of Leicestershire. I often feel rather uneasy about going to see such 'vagrants', because in the case of many species, especially songbirds, they're never going to be able to make the trip back to their natural homes, but it's different for ducks, which can always take a break any time they feel like it as they cross the ocean. And, anyway, lesser scaups are part of a family very much given to hybridisation – 'love the one you're with' might be their motto – so even if this bird stays here, it isn't necessarily going to be condemned to a lonely, companionless existence before being singled out for the attentions of a peregrine or some other predator with an eye for a stranger. Conscience well and truly squared, I make the short drive from home to Swithland Reservoir, a dozen miles away on the edge of the Soar Valley.

It's a site I visit a lot anyway. Always have, in fact. When I was a child, we'd occasionally stop here on the way back from shopping trips to Leicester, to stand and watch and feed the ducks that gather where the road goes across a little causeway. I don't recall any particular sightings from those days, but in its own small way it must have helped nurture the seeds of my love of birds. When, in the late nineties and early noughties, I returned to birdwatching in earnest the reservoir became a