

Nature Notes

AUGUST 4, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

The Barley Bird and the Comet.



Out on the Marlborough Downs, there was a song I'd strained to hear at home. It remained a possibility there, a trace echo in the white noise of grasshoppers or the tinnitus of distant meadow pipits; but here, this funny little key farmland bird was real and singing, and stole my heart.



The song of the corn bunting is subtle. Described as the jangling of keys, it sounds more like very small change jingled in a pocket, or perhaps the distant tinkling of an arcade machine quietly dispensing a small win. It is a dumpy bunting; streaky brown, with a fluttering flight often made with its legs dangling. It looks too heavy to do so, but this 'little fat bird of the barley' is perched on an ear of wheat.



In a hawthorn along The Ridgeway, I spot one singing. Farmers have worked brilliantly together here to include habitat for wildlife. In this one tree a yellowhammer pauses with a beak full of moth, three goldfinches alight and a pair of tree sparrows sit together. To my delight, the corn bunting throws back its head, seems to unhinge the lower mandible of its chunky, triangular bill and spills out a silver coinage of song.

Their song accompanies us all the way from Hackpen White Horse (that looks more like a trotting fox) to the Iron Age Hill Fort of Barbary Castle.



This is the land of the horse and in the middle of the gallops below they are preparing for a two-day event. Hoofprints cut chalk half-moons into the springy, shallow turf entrance to the hill fort and the giant caterpillars of beech hangars bristle like point-to-point fences. Great waves of chalk swell like a pelagic ocean stilled in time, permanently poised to break over the view.



The bottoms of the deep, dry, double ditches of the ramparts are starry with flowers. A map of the Milky Way embroidered in thyme, scabious, knapweed, golden Lady's bedstraw, harebells and viper's bugloss.



Lime-green wild parsnip towers above the perfect domed umbels of wild carrot. The loveliest of the umbellifers, the stems and bowls of those yet to open form stiff-lace wineglasses filled with a starry blush fizz.



Later, below the Hill Fort at home, we walk out in dressing gowns and wellies to spot the comet, Neowise; the path through the silvery oats, a dark crack in the earth.

The comet looks paused in action above us, the bright core of it smudged with the flourish of a thumb. It is a comet you might have drawn, aged twelve. We binocularize it, and the pale cloud of the Milky Way into uncountable stars and I think about the floriferous bottom of the hill fort's double ditches. We spot an iridium flare, satellites, a faint shooting star and return to find, now our eyes are night-adjusted, that we could see the comet from the garden – or even, the landing window. It is pouring itself like a firework down the chimney pot, its great white mare's tail fanned out behind.



Just visible, under our feet on the garden path, my daughter has made beautiful doodles from chalk she has gleaned, crushed and coloured from the spoil of the badger sett. I think of the marks we make, to record that we were here – from white chalk horses, to chalked animals to the marks on a page recording birdsong. At this moment, we feel very small, yet more *in this place* than we've ever felt before: coin-notes dropped from the corn buntings' song perhaps. Or, as Seamus Heaney would have it, "I was there. Me in place and the place in me'.

