

Nature Notes

JUNE 18, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

Proceed, With Caution.



I've never seen such a volume and variety of fledgling birds coming to the bird feeders. It's a joyous and engaging daily drama – and an expensive one.

There could be many reasons for their being so many, if, indeed there are; we are spending much more time watching and feeding them; it's been an exceptionally warm spring (though of course, this may have worked to their detriment too) and our birds are relying more on gardens, as their natural food ('weed' seeds and insects) diminishes.



It's a growing responsibility. A wire on the peanut feeder came loose and couldn't be repaired: birds could pull whole nuts out and might feed them to chicks (potentially choking them). So I got out an old 'cage-style' peanut feeder – but then the great spotted woodpecker arrived with two freshly red-capped chicks – and couldn't get to them. I ordered a new one. In the meantime, seven tiny, lemon yellow blue tits took up a permanent position on the inside of the peanut cage. We watched it slowly rotate like a toddler's roundabout. The parents stopped feeding them, just at the point when my supplies threatened to run out.



I was concerned, too, that the blue tits hadn't much sense of fear; especially when I had to nudge one off with a finger, in order to refill it.

They were joined by greenfinch, great tit and sparrow chicks, two very sweet coal tit chicks, a nuthatch fledgling (its dagger bill finally prompting a sense of danger from the blue tit sibling band). Queues formed in the roses that frame the window: wren, blackbird and song thrush chicks, and there was an eight-starling party in the birdbath.



I caught the moment another blue tit family fledged from a vertical 'letterbox' slot in a hazel tree along the lane, as they had done last year. At first, the chicks, jammed in one on top of the other, made me think of our rather cramped, lockdown home: and then, as they tumbled out, I felt an unexpected wave of emotion and concern. One bold chick flew down to the road and I had to flag down a tractor, *Railway Children* style, and help it to safety; others tumbled out and clung on to the ivy, trying to climb back in to the safety of the nest, which, moments ago, must have felt like a prison. They seemed so vulnerable then.



Our eldest daughter has just turned 16. We moved here two days after she was born, trundling our things a handful of miles along the downs. I remember feeling disorientated and afraid of going out, with the shock of it. That feeling has returned a little. My son is off out in his car again, travelling further distances when, for the last twelve weeks, he's been home, 'safe' under the same roof.

I thought we'd lost the blue tit tree in February's long ago storms. And I feel hyper aware of all the wildlife homes lost with every indifferent trim, unconsidered hedge trim, or wholesale mowing or spraying; it makes me unsure of the ground I'm stood on.



And it's a familiar sense of insecurity that floods me with anxiety at times. Of not owning anything much; least of all a home. There are sharp reminders every now and then, lest you get complacent, that you are not in control.

We must all begin to go, of course, back out into the world. To proceed with caution and a new gratitude.

JUNE 6, 2020

A Tender Key of Place.



We walk into the drying, sheep-scented wind and down the sheltered hollow lane. Light puddles on the dust and passing tractors mill the chalky mud-crust into a gritty flour. A pink, white and blue tangle of campion, stitchwort, bugle and speedwell thicken banks more than twice my height – something any gardener at Chelsea would be proud of. But I can't help thinking that a mower will come to fell it all, oblivious. And it being full of fledgling birds from the trees above.



The colours, sounds and scents make for strong, sensory mnemonics: childhood's sunlit lanes, allotments, jam jar fishes, tadpoles in the tiny paddling pools of cattle hoof marks by the river's edge. A patch of ramsons takes me back just a few springs, when I watched a badger roll in the thick flowers, then scrumple up bundles in its forepaws, to hump backwards, pressed to its belly, all the way back to its sett for flea repellent bedding. The smell of wild garlic has become that memory.



Out in the wind, the lambs are bedded down in the dusty, raised stalls between the root-toes of a big oak, or are lying sheltered, on the woolly leaward side of their warm mothers. We turn up the hill, my husband walking backwards, recklessly eating a sherbet dibdab. The wind polishes the newly toughened and lacquered beech leaves to a racing green gloss, bows the bridal remnants of cow parsley and lowers nettle spears like weapons at my bare shins.



A deep-wine, blackcurrent-cordial light filters through the leaves of a copper beech, turning my dress and walking boots sepia. Beechnut mast hangs like grapes; or fat, prickly bullace-plums. I wonder at the colour of the plush, velvet lining inside, cushioning the three-corned nuts within.



Walking horizontally along the broad, steep stretch of the open down, my right boot catches on my heel, so I pull them both off and walk barefoot, wary of thistles, relishing the softness of the wild herbs and catching spent cowslip keys between my toes. We come across a hare's empty form in the grass and spot its shape hurtling uphill like a cloud shadow. I put my foot into the impression it has left in the grass. It's too big for a perfect fit, but it's still warm.



The following morning the jackdaws fledge their chimney pot nest. I wake with them at five and am out the house by 5.30. Woodpigeons call in a continuous round of many voices from the wood and I listen hard, thinking I can pick out a turtle dove's *turr, turr* purring from their massed choir. But I can't be sure. It is a bird I so want to hear, I think my senses are too primed.

The barn owl is sat on the edge of its nesthole, biscuit backed, the sunrise warming its white-blossom breast to an apricot apron. His night of hunting done, he watches me from his wide plate of a face, speckled in dandelion clock seed around its rim. He seems mythic. I glance down briefly and he is gone; into the lacy garden next door, and up over the washing line.



I walk out into the blinding brightness of things, aware of such a tender key to this place.

