

Nature Notes

MARCH 25, 2020

BY NICOLA CHESTER

The Moon and the Goshawk.



These are strange and unsettling times for us all. I head for the high tops, to clear my head with a clearing storm. I can see it coming; great grey brush strokes drawn down with a broad sweep over the wet page of a lemon-yellow sky.

I decide to cross the unsheltered expanse of the arable field to the wood. I might just make it, but it is hard going. The surface is layered in rocking, ankle-twisting flints the colour of a storm surge. The soil has washed away from under them by a winter's worth of persistent rain. There is no discernible earth, only knuckle-bone rubble. And nothing between me and the sky.



I stride out as best I can and the field comes alive. Fifty linnets lift, bob and twinkle in the storm-light. Woodpigeons the colour of the approaching sky, clatter up and are joined by a whir of red-legged partridge and a pheasant, coughing alarm – but the latter have come from behind. It is not me and my shingle-rattling progress, then, that is spooking them. I look up, just before the sun is eclipsed by the towering cumulous, and oh! Slicing through the air, a *goshawk*! It comes right over my head, perhaps twice the height of the trees we are both heading for and is gloriously, breathtakingly unmistakable, all hip heavy and graphite-barred and *large*. It draws its gliding wings in, picks up speed and dives over the wood.



I look about as if there might be someone to share my excitement with. But there is only me and the sky. With an approaching hiss, the curtain of rain and hail sweeps me into the wood.

It passes quickly and I watch it walk its downpour to blot out Newbury, leaving lights pricking on in its wake. The storm leaves an extraordinary light behind it. The big cumulous clouds sail on like wet sheets, their backs gilded by the sunset.



The moon has risen into the gold-infused air above the little hidden valley. It is a magical place at the best of times. But tonight, I could imagine white harts and wild horses.



I clump back over the field, cold, wet and exhilarated. With a whoosh that sounds like another sweep of hail, a flock of golden plover come in to roost on the field, fast, low, crying, spinning me round and dropping in like broadcast seed, finding sanctuary here in all this bleakness.



In the wood, winter thrushes are gathered in large numbers, prematurely leaving the trees in silhouette. They babble and chatter like a rushing stream; a sound that seems transmitted on by the telegraph wires – and the satellite moons of the communication tower, to the moon in the sky they might navigate by.



Later the night is full of them leaving. Tomorrow, I will be planting trees at school. Green, hopeful, for the future.



MARCH 1, 2020

Alleluias and Storms.

Turning the key in the lock before work, the notes of a bird dropped faintly through the cloud and stopped me in my tracks, the way a much-loved song suddenly connects above the noisy hubbub of a café, when you hadn't been aware of any music playing.



I froze, head cocked to listen. Then cupped my ears towards the sky and there it was, undeniably, gloriously, bursting through the low mist of a cloud inversion that had us in its grip: *Lullula arborea*, a woodlark. Right over Home Field, somewhere above the back garden. Instantly recognisable when heard in full, but rare; or at least usually restricted to our heaths and open woodland. Sweeter, more plaintive than the brassy brightness of a skylark, the descending notes can sound like stolen snatches of nightingale song, a nuthatch piping, a mistle thrush or even a robin's descending notes, when heard in part; pearls and peels refracted through these songs, rather than borrowed. Although that afternoon, a chimney pot starling had already learnt some of its phrases; its little, spangly, black box recorder repeating them.



The *lu, alu, alu, aluias* on a descending scale are such a swooning lament. A pre-Raphaelite bird, if ever I heard one. I've heard them singing above stubble fields in recent years; and wonder if this is a trend? They are transient, staying, camping out for a few days or a fortnight before moving on. I skip to work, delighted, a little late.

The week was bookended by big storms and high winds. Storm Ciara hurled slices of corrugated iron across the farmyard, flung thick biscuits of roof tiles, rolled tractor tyres, banged barn doors and broke a tall Scots pine in two, like a pencil snapped in anger.



At three in the afternoon, a sustained, fifteen-minute gust splintered the fir tree in the garden with a hard crack and a soft *whumpf* of pine needles, that instantly darkened the kitchen window, just missing the house. The girls screamed upstairs as the scent of pine resin reached us inside the house and the telephone wires whipped wild and loose against the glass.



(A neighbouring estate cottage's near miss.)

A loud crash was followed by another as the old oak in the field next door came down, bringing the power lines with it, in a great violent ploughing of earth with its limbs. The second crash was a big field maple falling across the road by the village hall, blocking our way out. There was a moment of whirling snow and lightning.



In the lemony, grey-wagtail light of intervening days, I heard the woodlark once more; unexpectedly. It fluttered high over my head, whilst I was making repairs to the stable yard with baler twine. Like a chunkier skylark, a little ball of fast-fluttering effort cascading song, a golden snitch or Betjeman's heart of Thomas Hardy, that flew out of Stinsford Churchyard, rocketing over the ghosts of the elm trees like a little thumping fig. I marvelled that it was still here. Our dozen house sparrows fluffed, bickered and preened between the tangled thorns of the quince hedge beside the last lightbulb fruit, glowing and momentarily mistaken for a yellowhammer's breast. The red, lipstick blossoms balled tightly in tense defence of what was to come.



We drove down to meet Storm Dennis at Bridport, facing him down the A303, down past the barrows, Stonehenge and the flooded fields, to help launch the new *Red Sixty Seven* book: a beautiful and heart-wrenching fundraising collaboration curated by the enigmatic 'YOLO Birder' (Kit Jewitt) and the British Trust of Ornithology. Sixty seven illustrated 'love letters' to our most endangered, red listed birds, it's a thing of loss and beauty. It was good to meet four other contributors: fellow *Guardian* Country Diarist, Sara Hudston, writing on the Cirl Bunting; renowned author, journalist and birder, Dominic Couzens, writing on Scaup; John Lloyd who illustrated the lapwing so beautifully and Kerrie Ann Gardner, whose stunning picture of the curlew accompanies Mary Colwill's writing. I wrote about the Woodcock, atmospherically illustrated by talented artist, James O'Neill.



(James O'Neill for Red Sixty Seven Book)

We drove home through maize-field-stained floods, buffeted by high winds and slept nervously in the dark house as the wind wailed through the gaps in the windows, hollered down the chimney and felled another ash tree close by. I dreamt fitfully about losing birds and birdsong, and wondered if I would hear the lone woodlark again.

