

# Nature Notes

JULY 25, 2020

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*An Old Man of the Woods, and a Hare at Foot.*



Over the ridgeline of the barn roof, there is a confetti-cannon burst of house martins, that twinkle against a stormy, swallow-back, woodpigeon sky before dispersing like the Red Arrows. My neighbour's birds have fledged.



The horses have a new field to graze, and as we let them go, eyes popping with incredulity at the grass, a family of greenfinches fledge from the hedge above the big dipper of the old mare's back. The chicks call loudly to their parents and one lands on the rolling combe of the horse's spine, just below her withers. Down, barn roof, hedge and horse's back align like layers of a painted landscape in a viewfinder. The baby greenfinch seems incongruously large; its smart, new, bright yellow wing flashes fluttering. Disease has hit greenfinches hard in recent years, but they seem to have made a small, hopeful comeback and this spring has been full of their nasal, unmusical but welcome *schhhneeeews*.





The horses wander into the meadow grass and I spot beneath it, a sward of bedstraws and vetches, yellow rattle, self-heal and centaury. I know I'm going to enjoy this as much as they are.





Centaurry

Later, heavy weather and a porridgey sky lend a strange atmosphere to my walk past old and silent farmsteads and fields blushed with poppies.





The scent from wild privet infuses the air with a dense perfume and bramble and dewberry briars ladder and wet my bare legs. I have been reading and writing about the rural past, and counting hedgerow species to work out the ages of hedges (using Hooper's method of 1970).





Dewberry

I am lost in thoughts when I come across something strange on the path ahead. The dog stops, hackles up, one paw raised and head lowered. Growls. Whatever it is, it doesn't do anything. She skips round it nervously and carries on, tail up and waving like a flag. The 'thing' seems to be covered in feathers, is cryptically marked and squats like an ill hen pheasant, fluffed up. Or a headless tawny owl. I am slightly spooked and touch it gently with a finger. It wobbles on a pale foot like a fairground gonk from the 1970s. It is a toadstool: large, 'feathered' and unlike anything I've seen. A recourse to twitter reveals it to be 'old man of the woods' fungi. It is aptly named.





Old Man of the Woods Fungi. Perhaps ...

Out on the open and usually unpeopled downs, I keep below the ridgeline. It's busy with people and thumping bass from cars with their headlights on full beam as the sun sets. The poppy fields lie like picnic blankets below and I think about the news, and the newts beginning to stir in Kintbury's ponds down there; all counted in a precious meadow, saved from development. I drop lower to find the old quiet. There is a new moon above a semaphore of hawthorn.



A hare comes towards me out of nowhere, slowing hesitantly as if the big cogs of her clockwork haunches are powering down. She stops right on my boot, flattens her long ears and I can see my shape reflected in her nearside, kohl rimmed, amber eye. I look up to stay the dog with my hand, but when I look back down, the hare has gone. I never felt the weight of her lift.



JULY 8, 2020

***Vessel of Song.***



Spring walks into summer and, confined to our very small radiuses, it feels like we are walking with it; noticing some advancement or small incremental change each day. We delve and settle deeper. On the longest day, the song thrush that has been singing as long as the daylight lasts, every day since the days began lengthening from the Winter Solstice, right through to the Summer one, has barely stopped. He has been putting in longer and longer hours, with rarely a pause, with his sweet, rich, loud and carrying voice. Since March, I feel I have heard every note uttered. Today, he has sung from 4.30 until 10.23, just 6 too-dark minutes shy of 18hrs.





There is a baby thrush outside my writing hut. It has some of its adult bouncing confidence as it hops across the grass, but is a little slow to scurry under the hedge when a door bangs, or the shadow of a buzzard passes over. It still has a bright yellow gape, some tufty head feathers and a short stubby tail. But its golden spotted breast is all thrush, and when it pauses, head cocked to one side at something I have not seen, I am filled with such a tender feeling for this little, feathered, syrup jar of sustained and liquid song. A vase full of mid-winter carolling, that will begin on our shortest day and carry through and beyond our longest.





I get a call from a neighbour. Thousands of tiny frogs are on migration, set off by the rain. 'They're no bigger than a blue bottle and are going like soldiers across the road' he says. We go to see, and it is exactly so. The wet tarmac that divides the big lake from a wood of wet logs, leaves and sanctuary is seething with tiny frogs, no bigger than my little fingernail.





The migration continues into the following day when there is a thunderstorm. House martins and swallows swoop low before it, hawking insects rising before the rain. They are joined by a sudden emergence of exotic-looking scarlet and garden tiger moths, their cream spotted wings flared to reveal flamenco underwings against the slate sky.







Down the grassy tracks, there are orchids, wild privet blossom, singing blackbirds and sparrows dust-bathing in family groups. Another song thrush. I think of Thomas Hardy's birds singing 'as if all time were theirs' and when they were nothing, a few months ago, but 'particles of grain, and earth, and air, and rain'.





On the vergeside, teasels spike the air, carding the wool of the clouds with promises of chinking goldfinch currency, late summer. I rattle that thought around like loose change jangling in my pocket.