

BIRD OF MYSTERY



Henry Williamson

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I have now been living in North Norfolk for seven years, on a part of the coast where many migrant birds fly in from Scandinavia and the North.

When I first came here from Devon people were wont to say that I would be able to see all sorts of rare birds on the marshes and the sand-dunes, and wasn't lucky?

Yes, indeed, I replied. Now can you tell me what is the difference between a one-horse roll, a two-horse roll and a rib roll? This was perhaps disconcerting, but I considered that the next few years would give little opportunity for bird-watching, since I had taken upon myself the job of restoring half a square mile of land and buildings.

No time, I said, in a farm for that occupation of idle minds, bird-watching.

And so, indeed, it seemed, during those first years when everything seemed to go wrong. However, nothing that is worth while is easily come by, and even during that time there was an occasional day when a blessed freedom opened suddenly in my life.

Perhaps it would be on a Sunday morning, when five children and I would cycle on those marshes, along the sheep paths, or by the "greens", where salt vegetation ended at the edge of the high tides and wild flowers began.

Five children, four boys and a girl. The oldest boy found it rather slow, for, of course, we went the pace of the littlest one, who, on a midget cycle, painted red with a penny pot of pre-war paint - not much paint needed, as the mudguards had fallen off during a previous ownership - was peddling furiously behind, on wheels about the size of soup plates.

Along the Marshes

On those rare rides - whereon Father behaved "daft", they said, not knowing that he felt like a dog let off a chain - we saw harriers, herons, red-shanks, geese and widgeon and butcher birds, goldcrests and bullfinches - many of them just arrived from over the sea.

Sometimes on a Sunday, after the office work had been done, there was no time for a long walk or ride, but only for a short walk down to the farm meadows.

This was not popular; a walk with Father after hours of office work too often degenerated into a running pessimistic commentary on this gate left undone, that bullock broken out, the need for a wire fence along the wood, the theory of drainage, and who left the spade down there to rust in the grass? Usually only the smallest boy was available for such a walk, he was too unsophisticated to disappear when Father was observed locking the door of his office.

On such a walk young Richard, called Rikky, first heard a strange "booming" from the reeds in a dyke - a sudden bull-like roar, short and ventriloquial.

Where did it come from? No bull to be seen; only the yellow-tipped reeds almost choking the dyke, and the lisp of wind in the grasses. We waited; nothing more came; but the bird must be very near standing among the reeds with lance (here a word is missing, due to the paper being ripped) upheld, its body streaked and coloured like the reeds themselves.

Another hollow coughing roar - flat and startling - an invisible bull with paper lungs. A bittern, it was explained, a kind of heron, which lived by spearing frogs and small fish and also waterbeetles.

'Pulling' the Dykes

Since that afternoon the dykes have been "pulled" - hundreds of hours with a long-handled rake, made by the blacksmith - patiently lugging out mud, reed, and (it was said by the reluctant pullers) all sorts of trouble in the way of dock and nettle seeds.

However, the mud came out, and was spread on the fields - to grow crops of corn and clover, and only here and there a little shy-looking nettle, which didn't survive the subsequent ploughing.

Another of the sounds we heard on one of our walks was most mysterious. It came suddenly; a loud and ringing bubble cry, a link of bubbling cries, from behind an overgrown hedge. We stopped and looked at one another.

What could that be? The cry was repeated in the distance, but we saw no bird. The next day we heard it again, down by the big walnut tree in the garden. It seemed to fill the valley, and must have come, we thought, from some strange water bird. The next time it called we counted nine ringing cries - and once again the cry was going away into the distance.

Was it a quail? I had never heard a quail; though they were said to nest on the uplands of our farm, very rare visitors indeed. A local bird-lover was said to have paid £4 for a pair, to stuff them and put them under glass in his collection. But quails did not haunt water meadows. Our bird, we decided, must be a migrant bird, because it was only heard in spring, from mid-April until about mid-May. Thereafter the cry ceased.

A Prolonged Search

What could it be? We searched the old and musty bird-books which had come up from Devon, and over which grandfather and great-grandfather had pored.

Some sort of water-rail? But this bird called while flying in the air; yet we could never see it. It must be a biggish bird, surely, for it was a biggish cry.

A woodpecker? We knew the three kinds of English woodpecker - green, greater spotted, and lesser spotted. It was something like the green woodpecker's ringing yaffle, or laugh, but clearer, louder and more regular.

Was it a golden oriole? That was a rare visitor. Was it a rosy pastor? No, that was a kind of starling. Or a hoopoe? No mistake could be made about that bird, for it cried its name - hoopoo, hoopoo.

My little boy spent hours looking in the bird-books, searching for a bird that would look, to him, to be like its cry - for he could not read. He tried to imagine from the colour - plates of eggs, and the painted pictures of birds, a bird making the sound of nine silver bell-chimes.

Oh dear, what could it be?

A year went by before we discovered; then the mystery was solved by the watchful eye of Rikky, as he was painting his red bike green - lest its previous colour frighten away the mystery bird from the garden.

It took us a year to find the solution and, dear reader, it will take (here 2 or 3 words are missing) ... or more.

This item was sent in by Stephen Cullen. Does anyone have a copy of the following article so that the 'mystery' can be solved? Ed.



SOCIETY MEMBERS ASSEMBLED FOR TOUR OF GAULTSHIRE

