

THE SNAKE BIRD

Henry Williamson

The mysterious bird called with its nine loud ringing notes in the valley. It must be, we said again and again, a water-bird, because the notes had a watery sound.

By "we" of course, is meant myself, Father; for while Rikky listened, Father, as the supposed authority, did most of the talking. Father said he had just discovered a book of coloured birds' eggs and also photographs of nesting sites and these were shown to Rikky. There was the signature on the title page - Henry William Williamson. His Book, 1912. The Birdman and Nature Ponderer.

And here I was, 32 years later. Father, pondering with a small likeness of myself over *British Birds Nests*, by Richard and Cherry Kearton, trying to find out whatever the mysterious bird might be.

We sought for a water-bird, skulking in the long grasses by the river, under the hawthorns where the turtle doves were calling with continuous soft throbbing sound.

"That Queer Bird"

Next afternoon, coming in from hoeing the weeds between the rows of sunflower plants in the garden, I saw Rikky standing by the waterbutt outside the farmhouse door. He was looking up at the tiled roof. He said, quietly, "I have seen that queer bird."

"Have you," I replied. "What was it like?"

"I saw it on the roof," he said. "It was thin and black and brown, and it had a dead ivy leaf in its beak. And it was ever so small."

"A sparrow," I said.

"No, it wasn't a sparrow," he explained, "for it had a longer beak than a sparrow. And it flew ever so funny, all zigging and zagging about the sky. It was a totty little old bird."

He indicated the length with his hands.

"Why, that's ever so tiny," I said. "That loud ringing cry surely can't come from such a little bird, Rikky."

Rikky disappeared. When I met him again at supper he told me he had been looking at his nests. He knew 27, he said, including a scribbling lark's. That was a yellow-hammer, so called because the eggs look as though someone with a wet indelible pencil had been idly decorating them. I asked how he got to all his nests, being so small.

"I peer for most of them, but I send Robbie up for the high ones," said Rikky.

Robby is his elder brother, thin, quick, imaginative, fair, and blue-eyed, where Rikky is sturdy, reasoning, dark and brown-eyed. Robby adores Rikky, who is the leader of the local band of boys who roam our farm.

Their headquarters is in a disused chicken house, which, by Rikky's orders, is kept neat and tidy within. There is an old bed-frame for table, pictures on the walls, and a camouflage net covering the whole outfit.

"So Robbie goes up the trees, does he? Do you give him a rake-off of the eggs?" I asked.

"We only take one egg from each nest, and Rikky has that," said Robbie.

"But you always give me your sweet ration," said Rikky truthfully.

"Ah, me and Rikky is buddies," squeaks Robbie, who loves to act the clown. "Aren't us chooky?"

Suddenly Rikky cried. "Robert, hark!" He held up a finger. The fork in his other hand, loaded with crab and salad, was poised near his mouth. His eyes were open wide. "I saw the bird again."

Five children and two adults sat still at their places along the refectory table. Yes, there it was - PEEL, PEEL, PEEL, nine times repeated, loud and ringing, above the open window.

A bird like a swallow in flight flew away towards the distant wood. "It looked streaky, and black and brown, like a snake," said Rikky.

At the word snake 32 years fell off me. I was somewhat sad that the end of term had come, for it meant that the spring was really over, and the joy of looking for nests.

And no more would I call for British Birds' Nests; the last part - W, X, Y, Z, Garden Warbler to Yellow-hammer - was in my hands, as I sat on my bicycle outside the shop, reading "Migratory, arriving in April and leaving in September. Note: a betraying PEEL, PEEL, PEEL, uttered about nine times in unbroken succession. Local and other names: Snake Bird, Cuckoo's Mate, Tongue Bird, Emmett Hunter, Long Tongue, Barking Bird. Sits closely and hisses."

The Solution

"It's a wryneck!" I cried. "It builds in a hole in a rotten gate-post or tree, and they call it cuckoo's mate, as it comes a day or two before the cuckoo!"

Rikky did not wait for the "afters," as they call pudding, or more politely sweets, in the village. He went off, following the direction of the wryneck's flight.

He was depressed by his failure and inclined to be querulous about Robbie at the other end of the bath, who declared he had been driving in a jeep with some American buddies.

Rikky indignantly called Robbie a liar and Robbie said Rikky was daft, but they made it up over a basin of wheat and milk soon afterwards.

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