

# Tarka Country Revisited

## Trevor Beer

As a North Devon schoolboy, born in Barnstaple some 100 yards or so below the old otter kennels at Pilton which feature in *Tarka the Otter*, the book itself was almost 'food' to me . . . and remains so to this day. I would dare to say that no one has read or reads it more, nor follows the Tarka countryside as a way of life more than I, oft times deliberately to regain the feel of the story, oft times in the course of my work when monitoring otter havens which I helped set up several years ago for the Vincent Wildlife Trust.

Many a time the beautiful story of Tarka comes to life during the course of my day or night wanderings but occasionally a day is filled with incidents recalling Henry's words to such a degree that one hears his very voice as background to the day. Such was the case on 21st March 1986, a fine sunny day simply oozing springtime into every pore, and this was in the wilds of Tarka country . . .

Ramshorn Pond, a light breeze rippling the surface of the water that a month before had been solid ice with many dead and dying Lapwings and Snipe around its reed-fringed edge. Now in the early morning several coot 'ran' with whirring wings over the pond to hide from us whilst a pair of mute swans came to investigate the intruders in their domain. They seemed pleased enough with home-made fruit cake as I made a mental note I was going to feel hungry later, half the packed lunch hastily eaten by the two swans. An hour passed during which coot, moorhens, snipe and a lone Kingfisher explored and hunted amongst the reeds, the kingfisher eventually flying away low in the direction of the White House and Burrows, startled from its perch by the hovering shadow of a kestrel falling directly upon the water beside it.

We watched almost casually as a 'V'-shaped wake appeared from the reeds Chivenor-side of Ramshorn and some fifty yards from us, then my heart leaped as the broad flat head of an otter appeared in view. I gripped my companion's arm without speaking, without daring to move and we watched the otter swing sideways on from us to dive. Moments passed and then it reappeared further away; it had seen us for sure . . . but it came to land to lollop across the grass and over the high bank towards the Caen river.

We rushed to the bank-top and with binoculars had superb views of the adult otter unhurriedly following the shallow ditch past the old barn and then into the Caen to vanish amongst the several boats moored on the low tide mud. We did not see the otter again but as it had vanished towards the estuary we decided to visit Horsey Mere and that part of the Burrows.

Walking the sea wall at Horsey we put up a small flock of redshanks, probably the last of hundreds that wintered here and now on their way to northern breeding grounds, and

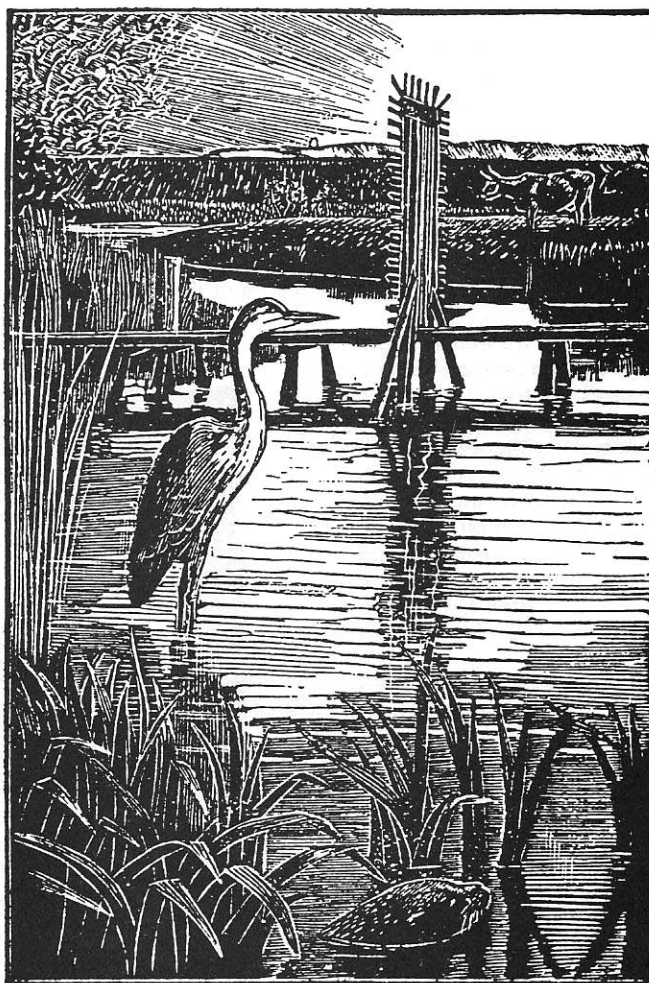
here it was that the signs of summer came to our eyes and ears. Sand Martins, so much a part of Henry's Torridge, screamed shrilly as they swooped over Horsey Mere hawking insects in the warm sunshine, their aerial displays never ceasing to amaze. These were the first we had observed for the year and no doubt they would be winging across the estuary and into the Torridge to find old breeding haunts within a day or so. A grey heron stalked the shallows, suddenly taking a large frog for there were scores of them spawning and in amplexus along the pond edge, great masses of the spawn like black spotted clouds of misty grey reflected from the sunlit skies.

We all ducked as a screaming roar rent the peace from the landscape and the air became filled with the stench of aviation fuel. RAF Chivenor had begun flying, the jet sound becoming part of the day. The heron's head and neck re-emerged from hunched shoulders as it resumed hunting. The first shock of aircraft sound over, life was again

prepared for it to continue all day and soon 'shuts off' from the initial shattering of the peace and one remembers it is for 'peace' that such machines are flying . . .

Time to go, a chilly wind now filling the afternoon along with the 'chack' of stonechats along the pathway across the Burrows for we had walked the boardwalk to the sea, followed the beach eastwards and then cut inland to pass Doughnut pond amongst the dunes and wet slacks, one of the loveliest walks imaginable. As if to emphasise that springtime was indeed here we were treated to the find sighting of a cock wheatear perkily flicking and preening its way along the road by Broadsands car park, another newly arrived summer migrant along with the Sand Martins, a fitting end to a Tarka country ramble.

Little has really changed here since the Tarka days and the very spirit of Henry Williamson is here, a place to actually sit and read the Tarka story whilst watching it unfold . . .



*Ram's-horn duckpond, Wrafton, with Burrows in background*