

The Bugler

December 2020



Bird identification key:
■ Here all year ■ Winter visitor

My Lockdown Alison Morgan

Back in the mists of my childhood, the RSPB used to make films, and my parents would take us each year to see the première in London's Festival Hall. One year, the film was about the Somerset Levels – a magical landscape, it seemed to me; a place I wanted to be.

It is twelve years now since I came to live, birdwatch and volunteer here, helping to survey, ring and observe the ever-changing avifauna of the marshes: bitterns, egrets, curlews, cranes, bearded tits, starlings. Here, birds mark out the rhythm of the year, like the hands of a clock, and it's a huge privilege to watch them.

Except that this year, somewhere between the bitterns and the egrets, time stopped. Gone the afternoons sitting on gateposts watching nesting egrets, gone the dawns lying in ditches waiting for emerging cranes; this year we have had to reduce the monitoring and suspend the colour-ringing. I decided that if I couldn't go to the birds, the birds would have to come to me. This wasn't entirely successful: squirrels moved into the new owl box, multiplied from two to six, and ate the robin eggs; and a pair of jackdaws decided that the swift box tucked under the eaves would make a great rain shelter.

But there have been high spots too: raising a lesser black backed gull chick from a week old to fledging (it had fallen off a roof in Bristol); pipstrelles flickering out of the bat box each evening; and regular morning firework displays



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of small birds fizzing busily about the feeders – blue tits, great tits, long tailed tits, coal tits, chaffinches and goldfinches, a goldcrest, a blackcap, a chiffchaff, the robin, a pair of dunnocks. It's not a big garden; but after ten years of banishing evergreens it's become quite a lively one.

Now winter approaches, and time is once again measured by starlings. Last week, on my way home from visiting my mother in her care home, I cycled along the Ham Wall track under a damp, grey sky.

The first birds appeared half an hour before sunset, rushing over my head from the north, arriving in wind-tossed ribbons from the south. I watched as they kept coming, more and more of them, inconsistent in their direction, indecisive in their movements, transforming the sky into a three-dimensional space through which they swept like waves. Eventually a single bird made the decision to turn down and plummet into the reeds, closely followed by half a dozen others. The flocks continued to dance and wheel, thin out into long twisting ribbons and come back together in clouds – and then, gradually, one by one they drew curtains across the sky and swirled into the reedbed, until the reeds blew and tossed not just with the wind but with the weight of singing birds. Their bodies sank down among the reeds, their voices rose into the gathering mist, strengthening as more and more joined them, until the air was filled with music. We can't spend much time with them, yet – but it felt a bit as if everything was going to be all right, after all.

“.. regular morning firework displays”



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