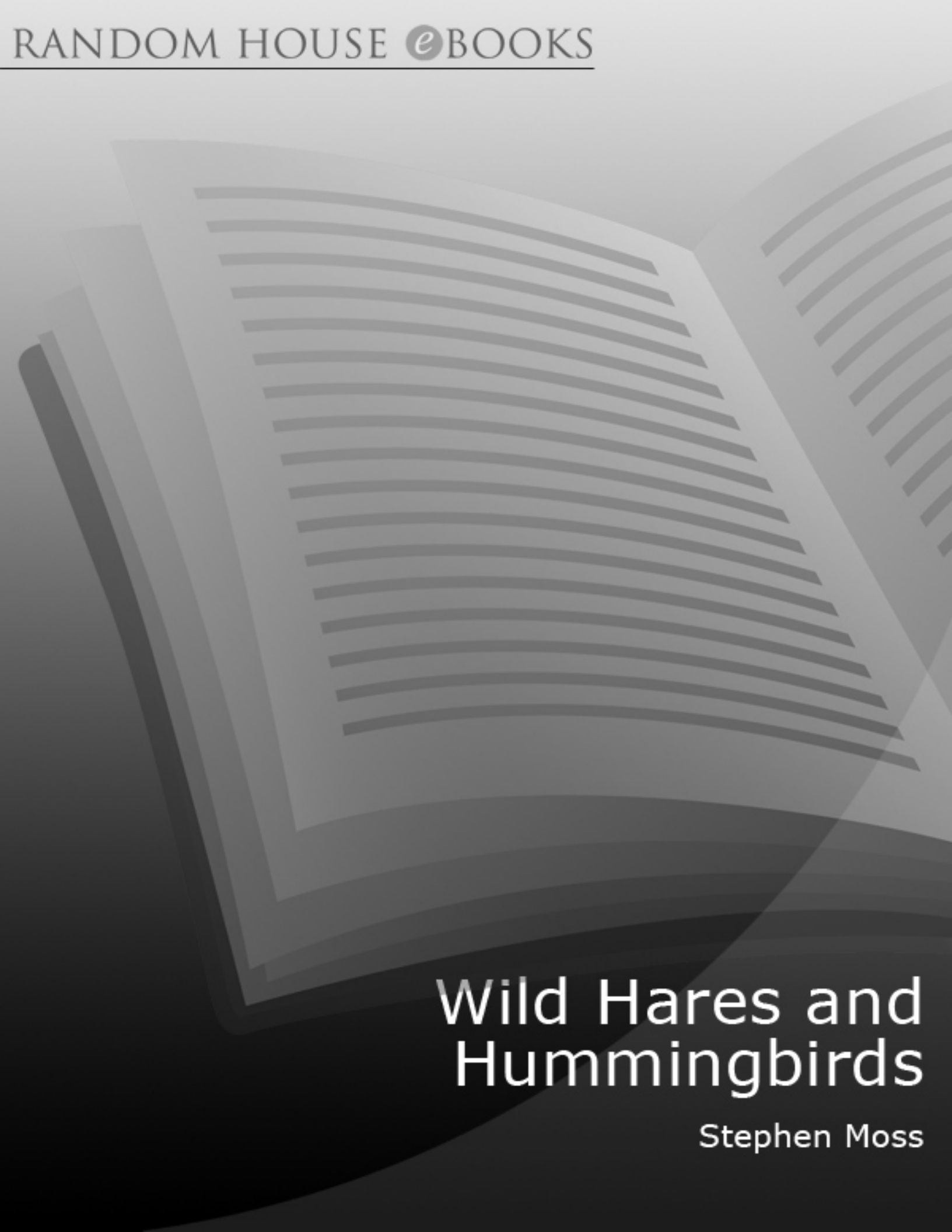
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



Wild Hares and Hummingbirds

Stephen Moss

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About the Book

Naturalist and author Stephen Moss lives in one of the longest villages in England – Mark, on the Somerset Levels: a watery wonderland steeped in history.

This ancient country parish, dating from before the *Domesday Book*, has been reclaimed from the sea over many centuries. Today the landscape bears witness to its eventful past, and is criss-crossed with watery ditches and broad droves, down which livestock was once taken to market. These are now home to a rich selection of resident and visiting wildlife: rooks and roe deer; sparrows and snowdrops; buzzards, badgers and butterflies. Amongst these natural wonders are the 'wild hares and hummingbirds' of the book's title: the iconic brown hare, and the spectacular hummingbird hawk-moth.

As the year unfolds, Moss witnesses the landscape as it passes from deep snow to spring blossom, through the heat haze of summer to the chill winds of autumn; from the first hazel catkins to the swallows returning from Africa; the sounds of the dawn chorus to the nocturnal mysteries of moths. But this is not simply the story of one small corner of the West Country; it also serves as a microcosm of Britain's wider countryside, at this time of great change for both people and wildlife.

This is a very personal celebration of why the natural world matters to all of us, wherever we live. *Wild Hares and Hummingbirds* is nature-writing at its finest, expressed through the natural history of one very special place.

About the Author

Stephen Moss is a naturalist, author, broadcaster and television producer. In a distinguished career at the BBC Natural History Unit his credits have included *Springwatch*, *Birds Britannia* and *The Nature of Britain*. He writes a monthly column on birdwatching for the *Guardian*, and regularly appears on BBC Radio 4. His previous books include *The Bumper Book of Nature*, *A Bird in the Bush*, and *A Sky Full of Starlings*. Originally from London, he has travelled to all seven of the world's continents in search of wildlife. He now lives with his wife and children on the Somerset Levels.

To Brett Westwood
a fine naturalist, colleague and friend

STEPHEN MOSS

WILD HARES AND HUMMINGBIRDS

The Natural History of an English Village

SQUARE PEG
LONDON

Introduction

OF ALL THE creatures I have seen in my home village, the two most magical are wild hares and hummingbirds. Their lives rarely intersect with mine, so the times when they do are precious and memorable.

A glimpse of a long-legged animal disappearing into the night – a typical view of a hare – is something very special. No wonder our ancestors believed this leggy beast had magical powers.

A brief encounter with a hummingbird hawkmoth, as it hovers to feed on the buddleia bush in my garden, is even more exciting. Of course this aerobatic insect, a wanderer from the south, is not really a hummingbird at all. But it is still an extraordinary creature, whose mid-air manoeuvres match, and perhaps even surpass, those of its avian namesake.

These striking works of nature, the hare and the hawkmoth, are just two of the hundreds of different species – from swallows to snowdrops and badgers to bumblebees – that I come across in a typical year on my home patch.

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THIS QUIET, COUNTRY parish lies on the edge of the West Country, roughly halfway between the Mendip and Polden Hills, on the misty, marshy land known as the Somerset Levels. The village at its centre is, according to local legend, the longest in England, though rivals elsewhere in the country have been known to challenge this claim.

On a clear day, if you climb the ninety-four stone steps to the top of the church tower, you can see Cheddar Gorge to the north and Glastonbury Tor to the south. The cathedral city of Wells is just out of sight to the east; while towards the west, beyond the M5 motorway, lies Bridgwater Bay, with the Quantock Hills and Exmoor beyond.

The landscape here is steeped in history: of both the natural and human kind. This is where King Arthur is said to be buried, King Alfred burned the cakes, and the last pitched battle was fought on English soil, at Sedgemoor on 6 July 1685. This is a place of wide, open skies, warm summers and chilly winters, and, above all, water. The land may appear solid and permanent, but it has been reclaimed, more recently than you might imagine, from the sea.

As in most villages up and down the country, foxes chase rabbits, badgers grub up worms, and jackdaws potter noisily around the ancient churchyard. At the height of summer, the back lanes are lined with cow parsley and willowherb, and the meadows brighten with carpets of buttercups. In winter, snowdrops force their way through the hard earth to bloom, and the calls of lapwings echo over the pale, frosty fields. From spring to autumn, the skies ring with the twittering of swallows, welcome visitors from their ancestral home in Africa.

This is more or less the sort of wildlife you would expect in any rural parish. But there are more unusual creatures here too. The small fields, with their watery boundaries, create a unique environment, full of nooks and crannies where plants and animals can thrive. So reed warblers sing their rhythmic, scratchy song from the ditches, while exquisite small copper butterflies flutter along the nearby droves. Roe deer are also found here, though they often go unnoticed because of their retiring habits. And, at dusk, a barn owl floats over waterlogged fields, on soft, silent wings.

As well as the imposing sixteenth-century church, the village boasts two pubs, a post office, a village hall, a boarding school for dyslexic children, a cricket ground, a bowling green, a thriving youth theatre and a martial arts club. Well over a thousand people make their home here, many of them incomers; some from elsewhere in Somerset, others, like me and my family, from further afield.

Each year, in the middle of August, the village gathers to celebrate the traditional Harvest Home, tucking into cold meats, salads and cider, followed by games, a children's tea party, and an evening concert – the nearest we ever get to the world of rock and roll. But the most important moment of the day takes place when the guest speaker proposes a toast, and the villagers stand as one to raise their glasses 'to agriculture'.

The fields of this parish have always been productive, turning grass, fertiliser and sheer hard work into lamb, beef and strong, cloudy cider. And although nowadays far fewer people make a living from farming than in the past, the way the land is managed still has a profound influence on its natural history.

Another way we use the land, which also shapes the fortunes of the parish wildlife, is easy to overlook: the village gardens. These range from lawns the size of a pocket handkerchief, and mown to the consistency of a billiard table, to tracts of land more than an acre in size, whose owners' benign neglect has turned them into a welcome refuge for wild creatures.

As with every other community in Britain – whether in the countryside, the suburbs or the inner city – our human influence is everywhere. So if wildlife here is to survive, and especially if it is to thrive, it must live cheek by jowl with people, in our houses, barns, gardens and fields.

In recent years, like everywhere else in this crowded little island, we have witnessed great changes to our natural heritage. Older villagers recall how cuckoos used to drive them mad each spring with their incessant calling; yet nowadays the sound of the cuckoo is hardly ever heard here. Other birds have seen an upturn in their numbers during the same period. Once buzzards were shot on sight; today, on a warm summer's morning, you may see half a dozen of these broad-winged raptors floating together in the sky. Both the decline of the cuckoo and the rise of the buzzard mirror these birds' fortunes on a national scale.

As a relative newcomer to the village, having moved down from London a few years ago, I must rely on local hearsay for evidence of these shifts in status. But even in my brief time here I have noticed changes. It was over a year before I saw my first raven, calling one autumn morning from the cider orchard alongside my home. Yet now I regularly hear the raven's deep, harsh croak, as these huge, raggedy-winged birds soar high above the village, into the blue.

IT WAS GILBERT WHITE, author of *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789), who first showed us that by closely studying the wildlife of a single country parish, it was possible to draw conclusions about our wider relationship with the natural world. Now, more than two centuries later, I am following in his footsteps. By looking in depth at what happens here, in one of more than 10,000 parishes in England alone, I hope to reveal a broader truth about the current fortunes of our countryside, its people and its wildlife.

I stay mostly within the parish boundaries, an area I can comfortably explore on foot, or by bicycle, from my home. I do occasionally venture out into the surrounding area,

known (to the local tourist board at least) as the Avalon Marshes, which encompasses some of the finest wild countryside in the whole of Britain.

I don’t rely just on my own observations, but also enlist the help of expert naturalists, and hear from people who have lived in the village all their lives. During the course of the year I track the rhythms of the natural world: the comings and goings, the changes brought about by the seasons and the weather, and how these reflect what is going on elsewhere in the country.

This is not an easy time for Britain’s wildlife. Our plants and animals must compete with the many other ways we use our limited supply of land: to grow crops and raise livestock, to build roads and homes for a growing population, and as a place for leisure and recreation. So it is more important than ever that we recognise why we need the natural world: not just for its own sake, but also to enrich our own lives.

I may have chosen to focus on one little patch of the British countryside, in and around my home village. But ultimately this is a book about the nature of Britain as a whole: what the wildlife and the places where it lives mean to every one of us.

STEPHEN MOSS
Mark, Somerset
April 2011

JANUARY

AS THE OLD year gives way to the new, a hard frost grips the land, coating every surface with a thin layer of white. The rhynes – water-filled ditches that criss-cross this flat, wintry landscape – have frozen solid. But the broader, deeper channel opposite the White Horse Inn still contains a few patches of water and mud. A couple of moorhens are feeding, their long, green toes allowing them to walk across the broken shards of ice.

Nearby, a small, hunched, brown bird with an impossibly long bill is also looking for food, optimistically probing the half-frozen mud. It is a snipe: not a local bird like the moorhens, but an immigrant from northern Europe. Earlier this winter it flew across the North Sea from Scandinavia, in search of a milder climate. It must be wondering why it bothered.

A local cyclist pedals by. The snipe stops feeding, cocks its head to one side, and crouches back on its short legs. At the last possible moment the bird springs up into the air on powerful, pointed wings – its fast, zigzagging flight designed to confuse a chasing predator, or foil a hunter with a shotgun.

As it departs, the snipe utters a curious call, rather like the sound of a muffled sneeze, or perhaps a boot being pulled out of sticky mud – an appropriate image given the bird's usual habitat. The moorhens, long used to the steady traffic of people along the edge of the rhyne, ignore the interruption and continue to feed.

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AT THIS TIME of year, in the dead of winter, the wildlife of the parish is best defined by what is *not* here, rather than what is – not by presence, but by absence. Four months have

passed since the swallows last twittered over the barns at Mill Batch Farm; even longer since the meadows along Vole Road hummed with the sound of bumblebees, and meadowsweet and willowherb blossomed along the narrow lanes towards Chapel Allerton.

This seasonal rhythm is the key to life here, as it is all across the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere, from County Kerry in the west to Kamchatka in the east. Those swallows, bumblebees and wild flowers are not simply memories of the year now passed, but a distant promise of the spring and summer yet to come.

It is hard to believe, as I gaze over this monochrome landscape of frost, water and mud, that in just three months' time the parish will be transformed into a scene of full, glorious colour. There will be myriads of birds and flowers, insects and mammals, all engaged in the frantic race to reproduce which defines spring. This scenario will be replicated, in different ways, across this little cluster of islands, lying just off the edge of the world's greatest land mass.

But however hard I look now, in the dead of winter, I cannot see most of the plants and animals that make their home here in the village. Some, like the swallows and red admirals, have disappeared altogether, and are now many thousands of miles away. The swallows have travelled the farthest, all the way to the southern tip of Africa. As I and my fellow villagers shiver in the winter cold, they are swooping around the legs of elephants and giraffes, at a muddy waterhole alongside Kipling's great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River. They will remain there until the time of the spring equinox, when they will begin their long journey northwards, back to our shores.

The red admirals – those visions of elegance in black, white and orange – have not travelled quite so far. They left us back in the autumn, and flew south to the shores of the Mediterranean. There in Andalucía, home of sherry,

bullfighting and flamenco, they laid their eggs; then, their mission complete, they died. Now, in the midst of our winter, their caterpillars have already emerged under warm Spanish skies, and are feeding voraciously on fresh green nettles. Soon they will pupate, and eventually, in a month or two, emerge as the next generation of adult butterflies. These, in turn, will head northwards in April; and with luck, and a following wind, will be back here in the village gardens by the end of May.

But what of the badgers and beetles, slow-worms and small tortoiseshells, newts and bats? These creatures lack both the ability and instinct to make the epic global journey of the swallow or red admiral, and must stay put for the winter. Each is now well out of sight: either in full hibernation, or simply lying low until spring finally comes, and it can resume its active life.

The badgers hide away in their underground setts, occasionally emerging to grub up earthworms and beetles to keep up their energy levels. The slow-worms, frogs and newts are tucked inside log-piles, deep in hibernation, having slowed down their metabolism close to zero for the duration of the winter. And the small tortoiseshell butterflies? They have sought out nooks and crannies in woodsheds and garages, closing their wings to hide their colourful pattern, to avoid being found and eaten by a passing wood mouse. They will remain there, torpid and motionless, until a sunny day in March, when their wings will once again unfold and take to the air, delighting those of us who are searching for signs of spring.

Yet despite the temporary disappearance of these creatures, and the bleakness of the hard, frozen landscape, there are still some signs of life. Flocks of lapwings fly over the village centre, their strong, rounded wings giving them the look of butterfly swimmers as they surge through the still, cold air. And in the tall ash trees that emerge from this horizontal landscape like city skyscrapers, glossy blue-

black rooks are already inspecting last year's nests. Some carry twigs in their beaks, to make repairs, ready to lay their clutch of three or four greenish-blue eggs early in the New Year – well before the leaves are on the trees.

Along the lanes leading out of the village, fieldfares and redwings throng the hedgerows, greedily gulping down the last remaining berries. These smart, colourful thrushes are winter visitors, who arrived last autumn from the north and east, in search of food. Food is also the top priority for the sparrows, robins, tits and finches congregating in the centre of the village, where my fellow parishioners generously provide kitchen scraps, nuts and seeds to keep the birds alive at this difficult time.

Whether these small birds survive the winter depends on two things: the prevailing weather pattern – either mild and damp, or cold and snowy – and the food and water we provide. Only when spring finally comes will we in the parish, and in towns and villages throughout Britain, discover the fate of these, some of our best-loved wild creatures.

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THE PARISH CHURCH is by far the tallest and most impressive building in the village – a landmark visible from every corner of the parish, and often beyond. It is the oldest of our man-made structures: dating back to just before the Norman Conquest, when the village itself is first mentioned in historical documents, although the building was restored and rebuilt between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Today, the church tower sports a large clock, installed for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887; and a fine set of bells, which still ring for weddings and parish festivals.

Whenever the solid grey tower hoves into view, I imagine one of our ancestors using it to find his way

through this flat, and often featureless, landscape. Walking the dozen miles from Brent Knoll to Glastonbury Tor, he would have passed just to the west and south of the church, before heading out across the bleak wastes of Tealham and Tadham Moors, his feet splashing through the flooded fields as he passed. Continuing through the ancient settlements of Meare and Godney, he would finally reach the safety of high ground, on the tor itself.

The church still plays an important part in the life of the village community. In the hallowed ground surrounding the building, a scattering of gravestones marks the resting places of the ancestors of many of today's villagers. The names carved here – many so weathered as to be almost illegible – are a tribute to the longevity of the main local families. There are Puddys and Pophams, Ducketts and Fears – with no fewer than ten members of the latter family buried beneath a single, imposing headstone.

As well as what it tells us about the human history of the parish, the churchyard also has a crucial role to play in its natural history. In the British countryside, where almost every scrap of land has been ploughed, planted with crops, or sprayed with pesticides, churchyards are among the few places that remain largely untouched by progress.

In a world of rapid and unpredictable change, the churchyard has become a precious haven for plants and animals. The notion of 'sanctuary' may have lost much of its original meaning, but for the wildlife of a country parish like this, churchyards do offer a refuge hard to find elsewhere.

In the middle of January, though, the casual observer may be forgiven for wondering where all this natural life has gone. But frost is not the only thing covering the graves. For here, surrounded by eternal reminders of death, is a particularly tenacious form of life: lichens. In this churchyard, as in churchyards all over Britain, they are everywhere: on the surface of the gravestones, covering

the trunks and branches of the trees, and smothering the walls of the building itself, especially on the damp, shady side.

Although we often think of lichens as lower forms of plant life, they are the outward form of a complex symbiotic relationship between a fungus and an alga. They may have humble origins, but are nevertheless extraordinarily successful. Paradoxically, it is their very ubiquity which renders lichens invisible to the casual viewer. They are an integral part of the living landscape, almost seeming to infect the brick, wood and stone surfaces they grow on. But when I pull off my glove and run my hand across the cold surface of an ancient gravestone, the lichens flake off, leaving a greenish-grey stain on my palm.

Like these gravestones, and the church itself, lichens go way back in time. Some of those here today may have already been in existence when the newly crowned King James II defeated his rival the Duke of Monmouth, down the road at Sedgemoor, in 1685. Others could be even older: for one lichen-covered stone, now weathered beyond readability, predates the current sixteenth-century building. The surface of this huge, flat slab is home to dozens of different lichen colonies of varying hues, from mustard-yellow, through moss-green, to a clean, icy grey. Together they create that pleasingly soft-edged effect familiar to all country churchyards.

What a contrast with the polished, black marble headstones in the new cemetery just along the road, where the village's more recently departed souls lie in rest.

ANOTHER ANCIENT FEATURE of the parish churchyard is equally easy to overlook. As I walk around the gravestones, I pass beneath compact, bushy trees with dense, bottle-green foliage. Come the autumn, these will be dotted with bright,

plastic-looking, orange-red berries, much beloved of the local thrushes and blackbirds.

These are yews; along with juniper and Scots pine, one of only three conifer species native to Britain. Yews are also our most ancient living thing, with some specimens, such as the Fortingall Yew in a Perthshire churchyard, well over two thousand years old. And of all Britain's native trees, the yew is the one most closely associated with churchyards.

The reasons for this connection are buried deep in our distant past. The yew's legendary longevity meant that it was often planted by our pre-Christian ancestors, as a symbol of long life. Many parish churches – probably including this one – were built on existing pagan sites. We know from the eighteenth-century historian John Collinson that 'a fine old yew tree in a decaying state' was still growing here in 1791, and would have dated back much earlier.

There is another reason why yews are often found in churchyards. Their leaves, bark and seeds are poisonous to livestock (and indeed to humans), so they may have been deliberately planted to discourage farmers from letting their animals graze in the church grounds. The yew also owes its survival to the flexible qualities of its wood, which made it especially suitable for making the weapon of choice in early medieval England: the longbow.

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As I WALK past the churchyard, I hear a distinctive sound coming from the dense, dark foliage of the yew trees. A high-pitched, rhythmic snatch of birdsong, almost childlike in its tone and pattern – 'diddly-diddly-diddly-diddly-deeee'. This is the sound of the smallest bird in the parish, and indeed the smallest in Britain: the goldcrest. Tiny, plump, and decked in pastel shades of green, the goldcrest can

sometimes be glimpsed as it flits around the outer foliage of the yews, before plunging back into the dark interior.

This creature is a true featherweight, tipping the scales at just one-fifth of on ounce: about the same as a twenty-pence coin, or a single sheet of A4 paper. Small size is bad news if you want to survive during long spells of cold weather. The smaller you are, the higher your ratio of surface area to volume; which means that a bird the size of a goldcrest loses heat very rapidly indeed. So like other small birds, it must feed constantly through the short winter days, to get enough energy to keep it alive through the long, cold nights.

Most insect-eating birds don't even try to survive the British winter; instead they head south to warmer climes, where food is easier to find. But the goldcrest has a secret weapon: its association with evergreens such as the yew. Because these trees don't shed their leaves in winter, their dense foliage is home to thousands of tiny insects. The goldcrest is the only bird small enough to survive on these minuscule creatures, and will spend the coldest months of the year inside our churchyard yews; feeding by day, and huddled up for warmth by night.

On bright, sunny days, even in the middle of winter, I occasionally see the male goldcrest puffing up his chest, momentarily flashing his golden crown like a shaft of sunlight piercing through a winter sky, and issuing a burst of song. It is a curiously optimistic sound for this time of year, and a reminder that however cold the weather may still be, spring will eventually arrive.

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BUT NOT QUITE yet. Overnight, an unexpected, silent visitor has come to the village. Powering southwards down the length of England, across the Cotswold and Mendip Hills, it reached here in the early hours. As dawn breaks, we open

our curtains to a landscape transformed into a sea of white. Our village, the county and the whole country have come to a standstill, in the worst winter weather for thirty years.

The village children can hardly believe their luck. A cheery local radio announcer confirms what they all hope to hear: school has been cancelled. And every child, in every home, has undergone a miraculous transformation. Clothes have been pulled on, breakfasts eaten up, and coats, boots and gloves donned with joyful enthusiasm. They can hardly wait to get out of the door – not for their lessons, but to play with an unfamiliar and exciting substance: snow.

With the snow still falling, all is silent. Apart from the occasional sparrow's chirp from the hedgerow along the lane, I hear nothing. The birds are far too busy to think of anything other than finding something to eat. If they fail to do so, they will die – and soon. Cold weather on its own will not kill birds, but snow does: for it covers up their food supplies. So the arrival of this white blanket from the north is very bad news indeed.

Which is why, since first light, the bird-feeders outside my kitchen window have been chock-full of birds. As well as the usual great tits and goldfinches there are greenfinches, chaffinches – even a pied wagtail, grimly clinging on to the feeder as he pecks at the life-giving seeds within.

The snow acts like a photographer's reflector, making the birds glow with unexpected clarity. Familiar species appear, quite literally, in a new light: the olive-green of the greenfinch, orange-red of the robin, and brick-coloured breast of the chaffinch all enhanced by this natural uplighter.

Livestock means warmth, and in Mill Batch farmyard a morose-looking herd of dairy cows has attracted a flock of starlings. Some birds are perched on the telegraph wires above, but most are sitting on the backs of the cattle, enjoying the benefit of warmth from the weighty bodies of

these huge beasts, as they munch on a fresh supply of hay. For one brief moment the starlings remind me of oxpeckers perched on big game, in the heat-haze of the African savannah.

Out in the fields, where the wind blows the falling snow almost horizontally across the flat land, nothing stirs. All wild creatures have sought shelter. Even the sheep have forsaken their usual feeding places, and are huddled together in a corner of the apple orchard; where the dirty yellow of their wool presents a stark contrast with the all-new whiteness of their surroundings.

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FOR THE BUZZARD perched on top of an ash tree by Perry Farm, peering down upon a landscape of white and grey, life goes on, though rather more slowly than usual. Buzzards, like all large birds of prey, take a lot of effort to get airborne; so during the winter they conserve their energy by staying put for most of the day.

As I approach, his piercing yellow eyes stare intently at this intruder into his space. He lifts his tail, and empties his bowels in preparation for flight. A moment later, he spreads his broad wings and launches himself into the air, every flap a major effort. He is joined by his mate, and they gradually gain height in the chilly air, attracting the attention of a lone crow feeding in the nearby field. The crow may be about half the weight of a buzzard, but he is still prepared to have a go at his larger rivals. As often happens, the smaller bird wins the skirmish, and the buzzards head off.

I move on too, down the icy lane, enjoying the clear blue sky and windless conditions. A farmer has put out a bale of straw for his sheep, and they line up patiently to feed, shuffling slowly forward like pensioners waiting to board a bus. Turning westwards, I head along the broad, straight

track between Binham Moor and Kingsway. Like many of the paths criss-crossing this and other local parishes, this is a ‘drove’ – a vital means of moving livestock from one place to another, across this watery landscape.

The first droves were made in Anglo-Saxon times, but their heyday was during the late Middle Ages, when a rapidly growing urban population needed food from the surrounding countryside. Sheep, pigs, cattle and geese would all have been driven down these tracks to be sold at market. Only with the coming of the railways in the nineteenth century did this custom eventually decline. But the droves themselves remain: allowing me to venture off the metalled roads and lanes, and into the heart of the countryside.

On such a calm, clear day, the sound of my feet trudging through deep snow creates a pleasingly soporific rhythm, in contrast to the silent world all around. My mind begins to wander until, along a sunlit hedgerow, a sudden burst of song jolts me out of my daydream. It comes from a tiny, chestnut-brown bird, flitting up from the base of the hedge above the frozen rhyne. It is a wren, so small it would fit into my hand, yet with a very loud voice. I wonder why it is singing on such a bitterly cold day, when in answer to my question – and the wren’s – comes a second burst of song, from a rival male barely 10 yards away. I have stumbled across the boundary between two territories, where later in the spring these adversaries will – if they survive the winter – fight for the right to breed.

Along the first stretch of the drove, the snow is covered with footprints, and the outlines of horses’ hooves. But after passing through a rusty gate, I find pure, fresh snow, save for the tracks of a pair of roe deer, and the prints of a fox. A disconcerting crunch beneath my feet reminds me that beneath the thick layer of snow there is a much thinner layer of ice, with water beneath. Fortunately, it is firm enough to bear my weight.

The last time I walked along this drove, during the height of summer, I was serenaded by the sound of birdsong, amid fluttering painted lady and small copper butterflies. Now, as I scan the fields on either side, my breath steaming in the icy air, I see nothing – not even the roe deer that passed this way earlier.

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AS THE HARDEST winter for thirty years rapidly turns into the worst in my memory, the birds are flocking to the centre of the village; into my garden, and those of my neighbours. Outside our kitchen window there is a scene of almost constant activity; even before the weak winter sun has risen, the birds are gathering, desperate to feed.

Even in this dim half-light they are easy to pick out, especially the blackbird, dark against the white ground, his short legs sinking into the snow. Once the sun is up the whole gang is here: blue tits and great tits gathering on the feeders; song thrushes and dunnocks beneath, picking up the spilt seed; and robins, vainly trying to defend their little patch of snow-covered lawn against their bitter rivals.

The robins look almost indecently fat and healthy, but this is a cruel illusion. The only way these birds will survive is if they can preserve what little warmth they still have in their bodies, so they fluff up their feathers in an attempt to do so. Many are losing the battle, and with each night that passes, a share of the birds that visited us the day before will now be dead.

My youngest son George is fascinated by all this activity, and loves to stand at the kitchen sink to watch. He is getting pretty good at naming the birds; though I am sceptical when he confidently announces the presence of a redwing. But it turns out he is right – this small, dark, northern thrush is indeed here in our garden. And we're not alone. Reports from all over the country confirm that