

NOTES FROM YESTERYEAR: 2

EARLY SPRING IN SOUTH DEVON



Spring is an uncertain season; it pays no attention to the calendar. The argument that spring begins in December is sound enough, for when the shortest day is behind we are on the upgrade. On the last day of January, as we steamed through the Mendips, snow-clad slopes detracted from vernal aspirations, but the long-limbed, staggering lambs in the South Devon fields were a hopeful sign. Before February was a fortnight old optimistic black-headed gulls were wearing brown hoods, their nuptial garb, though their breeding season was not due for many weeks.

South Devon, in early spring, is favoured by gulls, black-heads, herrings, commons, and the great blackbacks. At Torquay the first species has degenerated into a mendicant; it floats alongside the sea-wall to tempt the indulgent visitor to part with scraps of bread or biscuit, for this omnivorous bird appreciates wheaten flour as well as fish, whether the latter be fresh or very stale. Adaptability of the black-head in this matter of diet is an important factor in influencing its increase, for a bird which can pick up a living alike along the tide line or in a ploughed field is unlikely to starve if one source of supply is cut off.

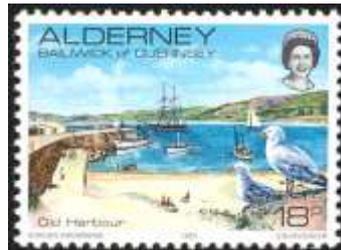


At Brixham, Beer, and other fishing ports and villages the gulls are never short of food when the boats can go out; they stand waiting when the trawls are cleaned, and are especially attentive when gutting is in process. The Devon and Cornish fishermen recognise that gulls are useful indicators of fish shoals; they give them passive protection, or, at any rate, do not show annoyance when one, bolder than the rest, filches a small fish from a pile upon the beach, and will often throw an attractive piece of gut towards the envious herring-gulls. Perhaps there are other reasons. In a land where belief in the "little people" still lingers, it is possible that education has not eliminated the ancient fable that the beautiful birds, their constant companions, may be reincarnations of long-lost friends.

At Beer, a stream runs down the steep street and dives beneath the shingle beach through a culvert. Of course it is not a sewer, but an open brook, and all sorts of discarded scraps are borne seaward. Some yards from the beach is the outfall, where the fresh water bubbles up

even when the tide is full; at this spot a little gathering collects, herrings and black-heads, rising and falling on the waves or hovering a few feet above to watch for any edible morsel

which may float to the surface. It is not a peaceful gathering, and when one red bill has seized an ascending treasure the corvine calls of annoyance from other black-heads suggest a rookery rather than a congregation of gulls. Some of the herring-gulls are smarter than their smaller companions, and by clumsy dives succeed in securing the still submerged scraps. Black-heads will remain fighting for these uncertain bits of refuse when piles of tempting offal lie on the beach, awaiting the next cleansing tide, but common and herring gulls wait on the fishermen and follow the auctioneer from pile to pile of fish.



Along the wet sands of Tor Bay the razor-shell hunters walk backward with short steps of bare feet, basket on back and probe in hand; they feel the shells beneath their feet, and perhaps bring them to the surface as the deadly "jumbo" brings up the cockles. So, too, the herring gulls understand the art of paddling. In the tide wash and beach pools they stand gently swaying from side to side; as their webbed feet mark time in the sand, they sink until their snowy breasts are awash. Disturbed, worms and molluscs struggle to the surface, seeking safety as the worms strive to avoid a spade; but there is no safety for them, for a yellow orange-splashed bill awaits their appearance.



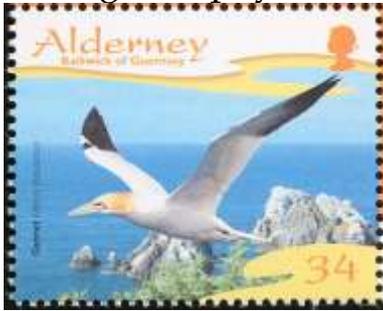
In Tor Bay is the well-named Shag Rock. Here, and along the coast wherever stack or rock gives foothold, the abundant shags stood drying outspread wings. Surely that ancient herald who first conceived the spread-eagle had cormorant or shag in his mind's eye. One day a dozen stood together on the Shag Rock, and not a cormorant was visible in the Bay; yet it has been affirmed that the larger bird is commoner in Devon than the smaller, greener species with the perky upturned crest. Conspicuous as is the shag when standing in heraldic pose, it is a cautious fowl; from its rocky look-out it can sight danger, and if a gunner approaches, the broad wings with powerful strokes soon bear it out of range.



It is when feeding that it shows special wisdom. The cormorants are expert divers, usually

going under after a graceful upward spring, so as to dive deep to where they can chase scared fish amongst the tangle-clad rocks; but whilst beneath the surface an enemy may have approached, for the submarine hunt is often lengthy. Instead of bobbing up to the surface like a diving duck, the careful shag first exposes head and neck alone, keeping its body submerged; with bill uplifted at an angle it peers round with emerald eye before

allowing its back to show. How it maintains its body in that position, adjusting its specific gravity, has never been explained. Seldom has the physicist sufficient interest in ornithology, or the biologist in physics, to induce him to investigate the problem.



The herring season was drawing to a close, but a few gannets haunted the coast, wheeling high above the water on narrow, black-tipped wing, then dropping headlong with a half corkscrew dive to plunge on the gleaming prey beneath. One day, close to the sea-wall, a red-throated diver was swimming and taking lengthy under-water excursions; it was on its way to northern waters, a winter visitor to southern seas in no hurry to feel the call of spring. Though still in winter dress its spotted back and slender build, but especially its slightly up-tilted bill, made identification easy as it swam within stone-throw.



In the Torquay gardens, ruddy with valerian, and gay with wallflowers, forget-me-nots, and scillas, thrushes were in full song, but the song thrush avails itself of any bright winter day to get into form for the later months. More unusual was the piping of the blackbird in early February, and the cheery rattle of the abundant chaffinches. The garrulous rook always has much to say around the rookery long before early nesting has begun, but in Devon the “daws” were more noticeable; round the red beetled crag at Watcombe, where countless numbers nest in safety, they wheeled in aerial mazes, crossing and recrossing one another's path until the eye was dazzled by the restless specks, and the air hummed with the incessant sharp and almost querulous cries. Then, on curved wing, like some huge swift, a noble peregrine swept over, and the sharp calls deepened into the long corvine note of alarm; but the falcon had no wish for “daw” flesh and passed on, and soon the sinister threat had slipped the memory of those grey-pated heads.



Invalids and convalescents, who have fled the treachery of northern winters and springs, sit in the sunshine in the sheltered Torquay rock garden. There, too, close by an almond in full blossom on the first day of February, were a couple of blackcaps, feeding contentedly on the ripe ivy berries. The blackcap, though no invalid, shuns our stern winters to spend its time in the sunshine of Italy or North Africa; it is an early immigrant, but by no means the first to return; these two were neither early nor late, but were exceptions to the rule that

blackcaps emigrate. South Devon had tempted them to stay; there was food in abundance, flies and fruit in the sheltered rock garden; why risk the perils of a long Channel crossing ?



A couple were they? No, a pair; male with black cap, female with brown; they were a constant pair too, electing to share the experiment of wintering in England in one another's company. In early April the cock blackcaps arrive in our woods, producing song little inferior to that of the boasted nightingale; they spy out the land and select territory, awaiting the arrival, some days later, of the hens. But what happens in normal winter quarters ? In Italy and Africa do the sexes remain together, and when the time comes for a northward move, does the male bird take leave, explaining that he is going to survey the land? Here, in England, the two were together, and when one flew the other followed; they were undoubtedly mated birds.



Blackcaps were not the only winterers on this South Devon coast. In that peaceful hamlet, one of the most beautiful spots on a beautiful shore, which shares with the busy Lancashire watering-place the name of Blackpool, the chiffchaff was working the blighted bark of the apple-trees in an ancient orchard. Woolly aphids, tiny morsels even for a tiny bird, supplied the warbler with sweetness and sustenance; it was too busy to sing as it flitted from stem to branch, and branch to stem, pecking, pecking, pecking, wherever it went. In the mild West

Country chiffchaff and blackcap, landrail and, it is said, swallow, vary their normal habits by risking an occasional winter, and more rarely still the stone curlew lingers, astonishing the shooter who adds to his bag one of these big-eyed plovers.



But there is another winterer whose habits, though more regular, are more surprising. All along those southern shores, frequenting the rock faces, the bramble scrub, and promenades were black redstarts. The common redstart which nests with us, and in Scandinavia up to the North Cape, spends the colder months in Africa; this darker bird, whose breeding area extends from the Baltic to the Mediterranean shores, comes west for

choice, possibly, if it travels from Spain. The little dusky males flicked their fiery tails as they clung to the rocks, hunting for spiders or insects in every crack and cranny; they flitted amongst the bushes which fill the deep valleys where tiny streams have carved their way towards the shore; they perched on the backs of seats on the sea-front at Seaton.



Travellers from Germany find their way to the Lancashire coast, and annually visit the western Welsh headlands, but we have still to learn the nesting area of the particular birds which come each winter to the Cornish and Devon shores. In those Devon lanes, deep narrow ways, some of them, with high banks and thick hedgerows meeting overhead, tunnels from which the feathery awns of old man's beard still hung in grey masses, and where the hazel catkins were thick and green, abundant lamb's tails, tits worked in busy flocks. The long-tails shot from hedge to hedge with high-pitched calls, the blue tits chimed, the greats and coals sounded their vernal up-and-down challenges. There, too, the nuthatch whistled like any schoolboy, and hammered with its pick bill as it ran up and down the trunks, often descending head foremost. Primroses and violets were in abundance, speedwell and avens weeks before their usual time further north, and even the summerflowering wild carrot was still out; probably some were survivals from the autumn, and had been flowering all winter.





Along the Dowlands Landslip, where the whole cliff has moved towards the sea, the laugh of the green woodpecker resounded again and again. Ancient timbers have suffered from root disturbance, and decay having once set in the insect hordes have hastened to assist in disintegration; the woodpeckers have come to aid the trees, smashing the softened wood with iron bill and dragging out the larvae of the wood-boring rhagium, of clearwing, goat



or wood leopard. The goldcrest, a common resident as well as winter visitor, was singing its simple song, and nomadic flocks searched for tiny insects amongst the opening buds. One inhabitant of the Landslip had much in common with the signs of devastation, the deep gashes in the soil, the bent and fallen trees, the great folds of slithering earth; the carrion crow, perched on some tottering tree, uttered his sinister treble croak. The rook has no fixed limit to the number of successive caws, the jackdaw is garrulous, but both carrion and grey crow usually pause after every third call.



Ring-doves abound on the Landslip, and doubtless some of the birds which cooed incessantly had decided upon nesting quarters ; but elsewhere in the county crowds of pigeons, mostly foreigners, roamed far and wide, laying waste the land. Desperate farmers arranged combined attacks on the birds at roosting time; the Board of Agriculture gave advice; many fell, but many more survived to retire a month later towards our eastern seaboard en route for northern lands.



At Watcombe ravens were paired and busy; their deep *glog* was as distinctive as their deliberate and powerful flight. Every day a bird mounted guard, looking seaward, on the fine headland at Beer. As it sent its challenge over the waves below, the ragged feathers stood out on its throat; it dipped its body and half opened its wings when it called. Sometimes the pair circled together, rising on splayed-out wing until mere specks high in the sky; sometimes, as they flew along the cliff face, one would sportively roll, shooting forward with feet and breast uppermost.



On the short grass, where bedstraw abounds, the raven finds food in abundance, though in small morsels. The powerful bill, which can tear tough flesh, can daintily pick up the whorled *Helix*, or intercept the sedate and globular bloody-nosed beetle. Both species of this beetle were plentiful on the headland, and when picked up justified their name by discharging from the mouth a red fluid. Starlings work the Head for beetles and snails, but they appear to be satisfied with the smaller molluscs; it is the thrushes which hammer the unfortunate garden snail on a stone anvil, until they have so shattered it that they can extract the animal from the shell.



Further west, on the long lagoon at Slapton, South Devon spring shows what it can do in the way of wild-fowl. The fresh water is separated from the tide by a broad and high pebble ridge and nothing but spume or spray enters the lagoon, and the gulls splash and bathe in fresh water. Coots were here, not in dozens or scores, but in hundreds; the western

end was black with coots. Widgeon swarmed on the water, the crested drakes announced the fact in a beautiful chorus of whistles. Moorhens made for the reeds, leaving a trail behind as they flew, beating the water with running feet; teal sprang clear into the air, and, with sharp whistles, dodged as they flew at great speed; golden-eyes and pochards beat the water with their wings as they rose with more difficulty; but the bird of Slapton Ley, at any rate in early February, is the coot, the widgeon a good second.



Ringed plovers balanced on the wave-rounded stones on the ridge or paddled in the shallows of the Ley, and meadow pipits and pied wagtails swarmed everywhere, hunting successfully the winter flies which settled on the warm stones. Flocks of skylarks haunted the pebble ridge, and from these winter congregations odd birds ascended, filling the upper air with vernal song.



At Slapton were no woodlarks, but small parties were on the cliffs elsewhere, feeding in scattered flocks like their open-country relatives; they too, sing in winter and early spring, but those most in evidence were busy hunting, too busy to trouble about nuptial music. Few human beings were visible alongside the two-mile lagoon, but one ancient reed-cutter was gathering the harvest. On the pebbles and reed stacks were stonechats, but beside the old man, seeking human companionship, was a robin, settling cheerfully upon the piles he had just cut and collected. The other birds shunned or ignored his presence; the robin enjoyed it.

N.B Excerpt taken from "Bird Haunts and Nature Memories", written by A Coward FRZS and printed by Frederick Warne and Co Ltd in 1922. Having finished this piece and, sadly, never having visited Devon, I wonder now how much of what is written here, can be recognised today in modern day Devon? Perhaps a member may be able to comment.