

Branscombe Voices from the 1940s

13. Birds and the Rural Idyll.

Is it better to grow up in the countryside or in the city? The city v countryside debate runs through English literature and culture, but when my brother and I were growing up in wartime Branscombe there was no doubt about the answer. Our parents believed that our remote village, in the folds of the East Devon landscape, was by far and away the safest and best place in the world for us, with a fascinating rural idyll on our doorstep, full of the wonders of nature and the healthy joys of spring - just out there, waiting to be appreciated and explored!

It has been suggested that birds are nature's best ambassadors. My father, who had grown up in the countryside of North Devon, decided that birds would be a good way of introducing us to the natural world, just as they had brightened his childhood. An early example of his approach stands out in my memory. It was springtime and I was just about old enough to walk up School Lane to Hole House. A few yards along the path towards Edge Barton he stopped, lifted me up and gently parted the leaves of the hedge bordering the path. There, hidden away among the twigs, was a bird's nest with several bright blue eggs spotted with black The sudden magic of that song thrush's nest was a very exciting surprise for a small boy and it turned out to be the beginning of my interest in birds and with it the lure of the rural idyll.

I wanted to know more about birds and our patch around the schoolhouse, together with the hedges, woods, fields and orchard along School Lane, provided lots of opportunities. As time went on we began to recognise their calls and songs, and we learned to identify the special habitats and nesting sites of different species - 'types' as we called them: warblers, finches, tits, treecreepers, woodpeckers, jays, buzzards, wrens, blackbirds, robins..... the place was full of birds with their joyful dawn chorus! Helped by a pair of wonky First World War binoculars and some school bird charts, we were making progress. Then the Observer's Book of British Birds came along with some excellent descriptions and illustrations - just what we needed as we ranged more widely. I didn't know it at the time, but I was already learning about ecology - the ways in which birds (and other organisms) relate to their physical surroundings and to each other. It's interesting that Sir Arthur Tansley (1871-1955), a pioneer of the science of ecology, who introduced the concept of the ecosystem into biology, had connections with Branscombe. He married Edith Chick from Branscombe in Branscombe Church on July 30th 1903. On that day Edith's sister, Harriette, wrote in her diary - 'The village is en fete, banners, flags.....an arch.....'

Forty years after that wedding, Branscombe was not en fete and there were no banners. Time had moved on and a subdued village was in the throes of the Second World War....but we still had lots of chirruping house sparrows. Around the school and schoolhouse they were everywhere, fluttering, chattering and pirouetting on the gutters - unmistakable as they dashed from place to place, squabbling away in little groups on the ground. Even the sparrows were involved in their own avian war. House martins were their opponents and they arrived in force at the schoolhouse every April, flying in from Africa. Numerous old martin nests lined the eaves on the front walls of the school and the schoolhouse. On their return the martins soon set about the task of repairing the old nests or building new ones - from the mud in the large wet area around the gateway, just a few wing beats over the school wall. In the 1940s local conditions were just right for them. But, year after year, the sparrows were intent on taking over the martins' nests - they never gave up....

Their relentless attacks on the martins resulted in many noisy, vicious confrontations, some of them just above our bedroom window. We found this upsetting, especially when tiny unfledged martin chicks were found dead on the ground directly under the martins' nests. We were on the side of the martins in this war, we thought that they had flown all the way from Africa to be with us, only to be terrified by the house sparrows, who were little bullies. My father told us to stop worrying about it. He said that martins usually have two broods and events like these are part and parcel of the natural world - a violent side of the rural idyll. However, at the end of each breeding season all the martins lined up side by side on the wires near the school, and there were lots of them, telling us by their lively twittering, that they had done pretty well after all. They were up there waiting for the mysterious signals that set them off on their long flight to sunny Africa, leaving the sparrows behind to cope with the gales, rain and frosts of winter in Branscombe. Anyway, that's what we thought at the time!

Birds and the Rural Idyll

My father knew that every spring,* a pair of dippers nested in a crevice behind the waterwheel at Mill Farm (Manor Mill). This was a good opportunity to see an uncommon bird, so we always looked forward to our visits to their aquatic world, which was very different in character from that of the house martins, house sparrows and all the other birds we were coming across. On a fine day up on the bank behind the Mill, we had a good view of the waterwheel with the millstream continuously cascading down from the leaky old wooden trough above - just the place for dippers.

For years this watery stage was chosen by the dippers for their delightful performances and they never disappointed us - the rural idyll at its best! Sometimes there was also a colourful sideshow from elegant grey wagtails, probably with a nest nearby. But the dippers were centre stage. They flew out through the curtains of water, perched on the wheel or the trough and bobbed up and down all the time, showing off their white breasts and cocking their tails. Then they curtsied, had a quick look around and dashed back through the torrent to their nest. Frequently, they disappeared under the stream for a time, searching for the insects and small fish that make up their diet. Dippers have a song, I don't remember hearing it down there, but I'm sure we were aware of their short sharp contact/alarm calls. They were very active, so we always waited for repeated performances of their displays - entertaining for two small boys. We had questions about how they avoided being soaked all the time and how they kept their nest dry with so much water around them. How did they manage to see anything when they were under water?

Studies of dippers show just how well they are adapted to their aquatic existence. For example, they have lots of feathers and big preen glands for waterproofing them, long legs and strong claws for gripping slippery surfaces, eyes that adjust to conditions underwater and flaps to keep water out of their nostrils. Their solid bones reduce buoyancy when they are searching for food under water and they can use their short wings to 'fly' under water. All this supports the view of a writer who said 'The dipper is shaped by the rivers on which it depends' - back to ecology and Darwin!

Are there still dippers in Branscombe? In March 2009, Ivor Dowell told me that he had recently seen one on the main stream. According to Devon Bird News, sightings of Branscombe dippers have been reported from time to time in recent years. This is good news, but overall, studies show that dippers and most of the other birds I've mentioned here are in decline. Government figures show that the populations of garden, woodland and marine birds have all fallen in the last 50 years. I live in a semi-rural spot on the south coast and I still look out for birds. Locally, I haven't come across a song thrush a house sparrow or a chaffinch for years and we rarely see a house martin. The character of the rural idyll is changing and now we know that there is a decline in insect populations as well. What is going on?... ..

Back in 1940s Branscombe I found that by the age of 13 or 14, after all it had done for me, and would do in the future, the rural idyll, as I was experiencing it, was no longer enough. As I've described in other pieces, the rural idyll was not without its deprivations. Also, the demands of school work were increasing and I was beginning to set my sights on a place at university and the world beyond Branscombe. Soon, we were told that we were all on the threshold of 'The New Elizabethan Age' - an exciting prospect at that time. As it turned out, two years of National Service followed school, so on August 12th 1953, it was farewell to the dippers, martins, sparrows and all the other birds. Suddenly, the peaceful rural idyll of Branscombe was a long way away - but it left me with many fond memories and some life-long interests.

* According to an RSPB report, one dipper nesting site is reputed to have been used continuously for 123 years. There have been waterwheels at the Mill for hundreds of years - perhaps our 1940s dippers were the most recent representatives of a very long line.

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