COUNTRY LIFE

The Weights of Birds

How much do birds weigh? What, for instance, is the weight of a heron? A good specimen of heron may be over three feet in length, with a wing-span of five feet. Questioned as to its weight, two persons replied respectively twenty-five pounds and fifteen pounds. For myself, the question of the weight of birds being a thing to which I had never given any consideration at all, I should have guessed, roughly, ten pounds. All these figures are crazy. The weight of a fine specimen of male heron, according to that parochial but patient Victorian observer of English wild life, the Rev. F. O. Morris, is only three pounds. For so large and voracious a bird, a heron living on eels, rats, trout, young moorhens and even snipe, the figures seem incredible. Yet three pounds is a great weight for a bird. The snipe itself, male, weighs only four ounces, the female slightly more. The sparrow-hawk weighs only five or six ounces, with the female half as large again. A wood-pigeon weighs about twenty ounces, a moorhen sixteen, a herring-gull thirty. But it is the weight of the really small birds that is staggering. A nightingale weighs six drachms, a blue-tit under half an ounce, a chiff-chaff three drachms, a wren two and three-quarter drachms. Even a cuckoo, strong-flying, looking almost as large as a pigeon, scales only a quarter of a pound, a fraction more than a blackbird.

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The Mad Hare

I often think the hare is almost the most attractive of English wild animals. There is nothing like the hare's powerful wild-eyed bolting. A single hare will behave with great sanity of purpose, straightforwardly, tearing to escape across corn or grass or ploughed land on a course as fixed and straight as a bullet's. Running from danger, indeed, he often runs straight into danger, simply because of the fixedness of his flight. He is caught like that. He is the victim of a too direct purpose. But in spring, gathered together, hares behave with an inexplicable lunacy that is like some idiotic mumming play. I have often seen a crowd of six or ten or more in a field of rough grass in February or March, behaving with a super-madness that was both baffling and comic. They would tear round and round in the field in spasmodic broken circles as though being chased by the ghosts of diabolical whippets: no purpose in it, no end, no beginning, only a mad careering to each other and away from each other and to nowhere at all. It was a great silly gambolling and leaping, as though the field were an asylum for moon-struck hares. Rabbits will behave similarly, though never so madly. They are mere feeble imitators, but even they, in spring crowds, will leap like lambs.

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Wild Creatures in Crowds

And so with most birds and butterflies and animals that flock together. They have special and individual moments of strange crowd behaviour: the great evening flight and settling and abrupt uprising, almost like an explosion, of starlings; the pretty twittering silliness of linnets; the solemn winter love-play of blackbirds, six or even ten in a gang, feeding on grass, eyeing each other, making discreet rushes and advances, almost nonconformist in their black suspicion and seriousness; the comic cackling of rooks in times of storm; the occasional savagery of stoats hunting by pack. Water creatures, fish especially, seem different. Except the water-boatmen, rowing as in a comic strip across the water-surface, in a delicious piece of comic seriousness, the crowds of water creatures behave with more design, as though drilled, as though perhaps under the domination of water. So even minnows will lie in small poised companies, in level order, all flicking off in one direction at the approach of danger. Schools of trout lie in sunlight as still as painted leaves, motionless against the current, keeping the same place for hours on end by the exercise of an astonishing strength, shooting off like clockwork darts at the fall of a shadow. It is as though intense training were essential for the perfection of the machinery of escape. Watching a school of trout, indeed, seeing it move off at an electric diagonal to vanish in a flash, you begin to marvel that man, using his primitive and clumsy devices, should ever catch any fish at all.

Snakes in Water

Against the lovely, collective motions of fish, snakes in water look uncommonly sluggish. They seem to lose their sinuousness and go along in a slow silver worming, as if not quite in their element. In bright water, silvered by sun, they move invisibly except for the oval, crafty head swinging along like a piece of chequered steel. They delight in the camouflage of lilies, lying among the polished green stems with casual motionlessness, quite indistinguishable. Then they give themselves away by the habit of lying with their heads on the leaf-pads, drowsing, softly curled, so light that the leaf is still dry except for its habitual blobs of quicksilver. They move with extreme quietness, with even less noise than on land. But for all their silvery loveliness they look somehow dangerously charged, silkily sinister. And sometimes, with bodies invisible, their approach is quite startling. It seems as if the head, disembodied, is swimming alone, moving with perfect instinct, like a torn leg of a fly after the body has been destroyed.

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The Comedy of Coots—

Of all birds, coot on ice are most comic. They behave like heavy-bottomed old ladies on the glass floor of a ballroom. They are hopeless and helpless. Alone, they can stand still or make short perilous careful excursions without much risk or comedy. But when danger comes they are startled into retreat. For some reason they do not fly. They elect to proceed by ice, and it is a procedure of absolute craziness. The coot flounder and flop and skate and hustle in some-thing of the same dumb burlesque fashion as penguins. They wobble and stagger and their legs fly from under them exactly, in fact, as though they were trying to skate. It is all pathetically comic. Once out of danger, they rest on the ice with an utter lack of dignity but with a dazed look of immense relief at being able, at last, to stand more or less still.

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—And Rooks

They are more comic, indeed, than rooks, which is saying something. Rooks have an air of comicality that is wicked; they have the appearance of depraved reprobates. As I sit here, writing, a great crowd of rooks has just passed over, careering back to the rookery, with more fuss than a retreating army, and for no apparent reason. They have come up from the river where, it is quite likely, something has frightened them very much. But for all their fear they look and sound like a flock of bird comedians. The main flock, jackdaws too, goes over with a great panic of cackling and squawking as though to warn the world of an impending typhoon. And strangely enough the wind is getting up, has increased its velocity considerably even in the five minutes since they passed. It may be, then, not fear of man but really some fear of storm which has driven them. At any rate, they go over in a flight of serio-comic disorder. And they are followed, far behind, by a solitary rook who is the personification of all rooks and all rook comicality. Over he comes, bringing up the rear, a great bird cawing and cackling in fear and wrath as though he is a Jehovah among rooks, as though, after all, it is not man or storm but only he himself that is the terror. It is like some Biblical enactment of divine anger, of an awful rook-God descending with a loud voice on an offending people. All that spoils it is that it is so funny. It is as though God were to have appeared and chastised the Israelites with an irate umbrella.

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Not Before 9 o'clock

Country life has its mysteries. Calling at a village post office at 8.45 a.m. in order to buy a postal order I was astonished to learn that that article could not be bought until 9 o'clock. "I daren't let you have it," the postmaster said, as though I had tried to buy whisky. I asked why. He replied, as though the post office were a secret service and not a public service: "Spies." The same comic rule applies, apparently, to parcels, stamps and in fact to post office business in general. Not before 9 o'clock—in the country. Well, it's an odd world where a man may not buy a drink after 10 o'clock at night, or a postal order, for fear of spies, before 9 o'clock in the morning.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Coronation Gifts

Coronation year is sure to be notable for much public tree-planting, gifts of land and, presumably, the preservation of more open spaces. It is not always realised how much, paradoxically, such action is needed in the country itself or how ill-managed such action can be in the wrong hands. Villages are not always rich in trees, still less in public spaces, and the gift of an open field to a village surrounded by open fields is not quite such a nonsensical way of showing patriotism as it sounds. But the stupidity of parish councils being, sometimes, past all comprehension, I would urge all those who contemplate giving away land or trees to make strict rules for the future preservation of their gifts. In a recent case a village council persuaded a local landowner to make a Jubilee gift, to be held for the village in perpetuity, of a small spinney. Standing in the heart of the place, this spinney was remarkable for some magnificent and uncommon trees: acacias, planes, large hollies, African oaks. The gift was given at once, freely and without condition. Before the village could wink the trees were down and sold, more than fifty in number, to a local saw-mill. The price paid was a pitiful ten pounds. I will not go into, now, the story of the subsequent bitterness or the subsequent colossal crops of kex and thistle that shot up, to sow themselves possibly in perpetuity, in place of plane and acacia. I hope I have said enough to keep any prospective benefactor, properly glowing with Coronation zeal, awake at night.

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England in Pint Bottles

A Colonial, newly arrived in this country, wrote and enquired of me recently where he could see that England, complete with dog's tooth violets, primroses and aconites and so on, to which I once devoted a paragraph of these notes. "Is such a vision of England," he says, "to be had in those half-crown trips one takes from London to Rickmansworth or to Box Hill?" To which one might reply that the English countryside is not sold in pint bottles. This Colonial, however, clearly seeks a larger measure of England, and obviously half-crown trips are not for him. On the other hand, what does he expect to see? An altogether idyllic England, complete with half-timber, pub. settles, yokels in proportion, entrancing landscapes with hoary ploughmen and teams breasting field-slopes in silhouette? Or is he aware that the English country, as compared with the best of his own, is extraordinarily prosaic, that many of the best of its effects are man-made, and finally that some of it, alas, is extremely ugly? I do not say there is no such thing as an idyllic England. Only that he would do well not to look for it. The best of the English countryside is got by chance. Its idylls are accidental.

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Cottage Idylls

Many of them, indeed, are altogether mythical. The idea of the country cottage, in idyllic surroundings, with roses round the door, all for two shillings a week, for instance, is very hard to kill, though a death-blow was aimed at it, as long ago as 1925, by the author of *England's Green and Pleasant Land*. We hear a good deal of the slum problems of towns, but there is, it seems to me, also a slum problem of the country. In many industrial towns there are still many houses, of pre-War erection, which let—main sewer, gas, water and decent pavements outside—for eight and six a week. In the country, on the other hand, there are still hundreds of cottages which, letting for that money and even more, have no water, except that which comes through the roof, and no gas, except that which escapes from the cesspool. Privies that are wretched enough in themselves are often a long way from the house, at the bottom of the garden or even across the road. Water is from a common pump or tap. "It is outrageous," wrote the author of *England's Green and Pleasant Land*, "that the girls of the pleasantest labouring families in our hamlet can only reach their cottage privy by crossing the road." Outrageous, but quite common. As to rents, I have in mind a cottage, poor water, poor garden, primitive sanitation, highly dangerous open stairs, which lets for ten shillings; another, garden privy, all repairs done by tenant, rats in the roof, eight and six; another, similar, spring water, twelve and six; another, unsatisfactory drainage, damp, eighteen shillings. All these cottages look charming. To the casual visitor they are quaint. They are the picture-postcard England. To anyone with inside knowledge they are so quaint as to be an outrage. In short, they are on a slum level.

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And the Remedy

The problem of putting these cottages into a civilised state of repair is an acute one. Rents are not always large. Often they are very small. They have been small for years, and fortunately the countryside still possesses some landlords who are reluctant to put up rents. A five shilling a week cottage, saleable value about £200, may need another £200 spending on it in order to make it decently habitable. In the past, expenditure by the landlord has often had to be met, partially at any rate, by an increase in rent. But the Housing (Rural Workers) Act has now done much to solve this problem, and last year the B.B.C. were responsible for an admirable discussion on its workings, the participants being a Hampshire woman, an Essex woman and a Devonshire farmer. Devon, more than any other county, has taken advantage of the Act, and it was clear that this Devonshire farmer regarded the workings of the scheme, by which assistance towards repair bills is granted by local authorities, as of immense assistance to landlords in his position. It was equally clear that the women were delighted with the effects of the scheme. They both described houses in an appalling state of repair—damp, privies at the garden end, bad light, bad cooking arrangements, poor water, children reluctant to stay at home in the evenings, and so on—and both were equally enthusiastic about the subsequent transformation. Assistance, I think I am right in saying, is only given where the estimated cost of the work in respect of each dwelling is £50 or more, and the value of such property must not exceed £400 after the completion of the work. But the scheme—already ten years old—has in it the necessary power to heal some nasty sores in country life.

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The Winter Strawberry

Among evergreens, *Arbutus Unedo*, the winter strawberry, is one of the least common and most charming. A native of Ireland, with a reputation for tenderness, it looks rather like a cross between a bay-tree and a camellia; the leaves have the same polished bottle-green, the wood has the camellia's crooked muscularity. It grows to a height of about twenty feet, flowering insignificantly in summer, fruiting finely in autumn and winter. The fruits are the supreme delight. Exactly the colour of strawberries, warm scarlet when ripe, soft sourish gold or green when unripe, they weigh the tree down with pendulous clusters, in luscious arches coming almost to the ground. In shape and texture the fruits are less like strawberries than lychees. They have the same roundness and the same knobbed, but quite soft, skin. But they are altogether more vivid, and in November and December, before sharp frosts have brought them down in a scarlet shower of pulp, they make an amazing sight: a summery canopy of strawberries shining in the first days of winter.

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The Golden Mushroom

There is money, we are told, in mushrooms, a lot of money; so much money that readers of this page have even written to me for advice on the cultivation of that gilt-edged delicacy. The supply of mushrooms, we are told, never equals the demand. Grow your own mushrooms. Buy our spawn. Get rich. And so on. All of which is fairly harmless. But what of the new schemes, which must have tickled and puzzled a good many mushroom-lovers having an idle pound or two waiting for investment? These schemes, rosily worded, seemed to be the answer to the mushroom-lovers' prayer. The public, under one scheme, is invited to take up units of £10. These units each acquire for the investor a certain area of mushroom space in the mushroom company. The investor invests, sits back, all his obligations finished, and apparently collects the cash. This cash is a guaranteed dividend of 10 per cent. To which my reply is that if mushroom-growing is as good as all that, why ask the world to come in on it? But is it so good?

H. E. Bates.

COUNTRY LIFE

A Winter Fungus

The winter has been notable for many fungi, and there was nothing brighter in the rain-blackened January hedgerows than a small fiery scarlet little species about the size and shape of an acorn cup. It shone out from rain-flattened leaves of strawberry and primrose rather like a forgotten strawberry itself. It looked like a mistake. When it was found to be growing at the end of small taper-sticks of ash and hazel it looked like a freak. Then it was found everywhere, and always in the same place, at the ends of sticks, so that it looked like a small child's bubble-pipe with black stem and scarlet bowl. It was a delight. Then it got to be something of a mystery. Ponderous search among the learned, much wrestling with botanical latinity, failed to identify it. Then it was felt that it might not be a fungus at all, but a lichen. More ponderous search through the 28 volumes and 2,000 plates of Sowerby failed to identify it also. Blessed, perhaps, are the ignorant. I would like to have produced the proper impeccable botanical syllables for this delightful creature. But there it is. I must think of it instead, in ignorance, as a small strawberry bubble-pipe, and have my pleasure, and let it go at that.

* * * *

A Question of Names

This question of botanical latinity has been known, often, to get otherwise peaceable folk all worked up. There are some who, fed on the beefsteak of insularity, insist on English names for what are accepted as English flowers. To this group belonged a lady who, pointing to a species for whose catalogue name I had struggled in vain, flattened me out with "We prefer the pretty English names. Star of the Veldt." A moment before we had been speaking without question of her delphiniums, her eremurus, her primulae. This lady and her kind should resort to Farrer, who long ago came down very hard with all his verbose gusto on the heads of those who are bigoted in this question, one way or the other. Farrer saw the ludicrous pomposity, the absurd impossibility of a system which, operating to logical extremity, could produce such a "cranky compilation of huge Latin epithets" as "an acaulescent herb of circinate vernation with the leaves imparipinnatipartite or uncinate-lyrate with mucronate-crenulate lobules, setulose-papillose, decurrent, pedunculate and persistent." But Farrer could see also the naïve stupidity of the loyalty to so-called "common names," and of that movement, led by Ruskin, which rechristened so much that never needed rechristening, and which gave us the ugliness of "rockfoil" for saxifrage, "bellflower" for campanula, and "rock-cress" (worst of all) for aubretia. Names coined and anglicised by generations of tenderness Farrer loved: columbine, primrose, cowslip, celandine, bluebell, monkshood, dandelion and so on. But he was not blind to the fact that for many flowers there was no such blessing, and that their only names were, and always had been classical. And for that reason he was not oblivious of the beauty, both of look and sound, of names like Soldanella alpina, anemone appenina, primula cashmiriana, and all the silky line downwards from adonis, andromeda and androsace.

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The Flowers of Streams

The charm of purely water flowers is only exceeded, to my mind, by the loveliness of things growing on the fringes of streams. In late summer loosestrife towers up in magenta steeples, the rather flamboyant colour softened down by the water itself, by the corn-colour of the burnt-up grass and, where it still persists, by the cream-fluffed feathers of meadowsweet. Wild iris are over by then. The green seeds are fattening to pod, and bulrushes are rising in dark sienna platoons, stiff and artificial, military in their sword-straightness and uniformity. They were held, once, in vast esteem for the mantelpiece, in winter; and I remember we coveted them and I thought they were like the war drum-sticks of a savage people. About the same time, July and August, water-mint edges every river and brook and ditch with a cloud-embroidery of mauve. It smells too fiercely for me—a contradictory little plant, so mild in flower, so astringent and harsh in scent. Willow-herb is there like some wild sowing of pink-flowered corn. They call it Codlins and Cream, I can't quite see why, and it has been almost ousted now by its finer namesake, the rose-bay willow-herb, a plant that has swept England like a pink fire. Frothing seed, it pinks whole acres in wild places. The old willow herb is never so prodigal; it clings to water. It is a lovely thing but, like many late summer flowers, unlovable. It is the earlier blossomings, both of tree and flower, that go to the heart; the great water-fed tussocks of the primroses full-blown on the water-edge, the bell-headed cowslips, golden, deep wine-scented, the butter-varnished bowls of kingcups, the small vaporous flowers of the mauve lady-smocks.

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Water Ranunculus

These water embroideries run through all the colours, from the enamel blue of water forget-me-not through the golds and creams of kingcup and cowslip and meadowsweet to the pinks and purples of willow-herb and loosestrife. But true water flowers, that can grow only in water, have no colour like this, with yellow water-lily and yellow mimulus as glorious exceptions. But even yellow water-lilies are not spectacular. This leaves only that little lizard-bellied yellow monkey-musk, with its soft blood-spotted trumpets, and even that is happy sometimes on land as well as water. I can think of no other water flowers, in England, that break the rule of white. It would in fact seem odd and in some way out of harmony with English waters to come suddenly upon some scarlet reach of water-poppy, a blue bay of water-cornflowers, some orange island of water-marigold. It seems right, somehow, for English water-flowers to have a water delicacy, a northern and almost icy purity of colourlessness. So we get those common fragile islands of quiet-flowering water-weed, of which water-ranunculus is the best and strangest. Floating densely, white-flowered, almost like a white buttercup, it has this curious quality: that its leaves change their shape above water. Below water they are like the leaves of crow's foot; they branch out, airy, many-fingered, almost like seaweed. Above it, they become solid, without any airiness and with the shape of clover. In its full best, in early summer, this flower effaces water, transforms it into one solid mass of shining white and green, like some mossy island of white saxifrage.

* * * *

Pike and Dragonflies

It is customary to think of fish as creatures of perpetual restlessness, never still; but there is no stillness like the stillness of a sunning pike. He lies as stiff and immobile as a rod of yellowish steel. No bird, and I believe no animal, attains that same perfection of rigidity. It is at once dynamic and sinister. It contains a terrific potentiality of speed and strength. Yet it looks, at first sight, a sleepy and gentle pose, almost feline, the mere silky shadow of a great leaf drowning dimly in the sun-clear water. This wonderful immobility is only matched, I think, by the poise of dragonflies. I saw, once, an endless procession, just over an area of water-lilies, of small sapphire dragonflies, a continuous play of blue gauze over the snowy flowers above the sun-glassy water. It was all confined, in true dragon-fly fashion, to one small space. It was a continuous turning and returning, an endless darting, poising, striking and hovering, so swift that it was often lost in sunlight. It was like a crazy flight of almost invisible humming-birds. It never rested. Poised in that miraculous act of hovering, wings invisible, bodies like tiny fingers of blue steel, these small fragile creatures had exactly the same suspended power, the same dynamic and thrilling immobility, as the pike lying in wait in the water.

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A Fine Verbena

Verbena Bonariensis has not until this year, to my knowledge, appeared in seed catalogues. It is altogether a splendid plant: four feet high, slender but tough, with foliage rather like a statice, and flat-headed purple blossoms after the true verbena fashion. Quite hardy, though cut down in winter, it springs up with great lustiness in spring from many side-stocks, branching out for flower in summer. It needs no staking and is one of those obliging plants, like *Verbena venosa*, which flowers on and on for a great length of time. It ought to go well with *Achillea Filipendula*, which it rather resembles in shape, but its friendly purple would hurt nothing.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

War on the Wood-Pigeon

Farmers have announced the organisation of serious war, at last, on the wood-pigeon, that symbolically peaceful bird so powerfully beautiful in flight and so gluttonously pestilential in habit. It is the wholesale stripping, in some districts, of acres of winter greenstuffs that is troubling farmers. The pigeon is merciless towards the brussels-sprout. In hard winters he attacks it because other food is scarce; in mild winters he attacks it because he is a glutton anyway. He lacerates the whole plant, crown, buttons and all, with a savage voracity that makes the nibblings of rabbits look almost like the chimblings of mice. The flocks this winter seem greater, if anything, and far less shy, than usual. They have fed much under oaks and beeches, evidently on acorns and mast. I was once shown, by an animal trainer, the claw of a lion. The beak of the wood pigeon has something in common with it. For the piece of hooked lion-steel could have ripped open the flesh of a man as easily as the pigeon-beak rips open the pod of a pea. That ragged but fatal slash at the lush pods of summer seems, in fact, altogether too ferocious for the dove of peace. But then, has not history taught us that olive branches are now offered on the points of a million bayonets?

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The Charm of Pigeons

Much though I hate his slash at my winter greens and my summer peas, I like the wood-pigeon. I like, especially, two things about him: I like his summer voice and I like, almost as much, one special and almost crazy aspect of his flight. That summer note, of all bird-notes the most summery, should begin to be heard, according to the authorities, somewhere about the end of February. This year it had already begun, on mild wet days, at the beginning of February. Heard in the dark mornings, it was almost like a dream. It is a note belonging to the high orchestras of summer, a tender honeyed moan, more monotonous than the cuckoo's, that must first have connected the bird with peace. The flight has also something in common with the cuckoo's: the same straightforward direction of power, much the same pace. But its one special idiosyncrasy, which Gilbert White remarked on but did not stop to describe, is unique. That sudden upward swoop and clap of wings at the crest, followed by a dying fall, is one of the loveliest and strangest stunts in all bird flight. It never fails to take me by surprise. There is a kind of mock tragedy in it, as though the bird had been shot by a spasm of joy and had fallen in some sort of ecstatic imitation of death.

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The Wild Gladiolus

The wild English gladiolus, *Gladiolus Illyricus*, is one of those indigenous plants whose native existence, like that of *Daphne Mezerium*, seems always to have been on the verge of mythical. This small-spiked, bright purple little species has never been found except in one locality, the New Forest. The *Victoria County History of Hampshire* confirms this, and guide books on that county take pride in it. On the other hand Sowerby, in that great compilation made at the end of the eighteenth century, does not mention it. Step does not mention it. Moore, in a Victorian work on English wild flowers, does not mention it, though he includes the Daphne. Indeed I find it very hard to find anyone who does mention it—except, oddly enough, the seed catalogues, which offer this too-modest, mythical little thing at sixpence a packet. I have a feeling, somehow, that *G. Illyricus* is one with that wild pink cyclamen reputed to grow in parts of Cornwall and Wales, on which the authorities are also silent; and which in turn may have something in common with those wild Chiltern snowdrops which I once went to find on the advice of the local enthusiast, and which turned out, at last, to be primroses.

* * * *

A Garden Stoat

I count it a lucky day when the stoat appears from his home in the Lonicera hedge to do a bit of hunting or exploration or some brief moments of almost squirrel-like exercise on the grass. He appears rarely enough, though more often now than the pair of weasels living in the same hedge, which at one time I saw almost every day, when they explored the hedge like small brown, almost saffron-bellied snakes. In the summer the stoat often hunted in the garden. We were plagued by a family of young rabbits, about six all told, which had squeezed in under the wire. The stoat came to hunt them, until finally there were no more to hunt. He was a swift performer, and I never saw any of that grand guignol drama, the slow circumvention and so-called hypnotism, that arouses horror among those who persist in applying man-made laws to the world of nature. The young rabbits had seats in the rock roses or among the small forests of anthemis and alstromeria, and the stoat had nothing more to do than a boy who falls on a young rabbit with his hands in the hay-field. But one afternoon the hunt came out into the open, and as I sat on the lawn a rabbit ran past my feet at full speed and the stoat came bounding after him, with amazingly swift squirrel-like leaps of pursuit. The rabbit took to the hedge, a fatal thing, and in a second it was all over. When I went to look, in half a minute, stoat and rabbit had gone as completely as though they had wiped each other out.

* * * *

Stoat and Birds

All this was really against the rules, according to which the stoat should have gone round in dithering circles, the rabbit limping helplessly in mesmerised terror, the performance inexorable, long-drawn-out. But it is, I think, a mistake to suppose that that strange process of terrorising is inevitable. A stoat will sometimes kill swiftly, especially in the case of young rabbits. And later this same stoat was to break another rule. He ran across the lawn, one winter morning, and scaled the willow-tree. His feet made small cat-like scratching noises on the furrowed bark. By some odd chance the tree was crowded with small birds, tits, sparrows, chaffinches. Hudson has described how, at the approach of a weasel, a group of such birds was striken into a state of excited terror. But in the willow-tree nothing happened at all. It is one of those old trees, hollow-trunked, known in some parts as doddle-willows. The stoat ran about among the branches and inside the trunk for a long time. But the birds showed no movement and no excitement. It was an hour before the stoat came down again. By that time the first birds had gone and others had replaced them. But during the whole time not a single feather had shown a flutter of alarm or fear. Does a stoat in a tree lose all its power of terror?

* * * *

First Spring

At the beginning of January we took our pleasure, as always, more from the remnants of summer than the promise of spring. We made much of the ragged stuff of lingering roses, old-maidish veronicas, shabby bits of marigold and alyssum, the usual out-of-season lupins. A month worked a miracle. By the beginning of February primroses were not only out in copses, but strong, upstanding, with real spring freshness. Sallows had gone beyond a mere flickering of silver buds and were luminous against the winey background of chestnuts. Celandines were out by the third of the month, wonderfully vivid, sun-varnished. Skylarks were strong. Thrushes, already indomitable in the mornings, began to reach a wonderful pitch of clarity in the twilights. Bluebells were far up. In the garden the desolation of too much rain began to be broken up by crocus of half a dozen kinds. Almonds were pink in bud. And in the hedgerows, more significant even than hazel or sallow or the green ears of honeysuckle, a miracle of change had come over the hawthorn. Its buds were not only red, but green. They seemed like the first true stitches in the fabric of spring. But by the middle of the month the fabric could show another and perhaps even more remarkable stitch: the first buds of blackthorn flower, creamy brown, fat-clustered on the spring branches. Ready to break, they were almost two full months before their time. They should break in a fortnight; which means, according to tradition, a blast of snow for March. The countryman takes gloomy delight in this bitter coincidence of snow and blackthorn, and calls it blackthorn winter and triumphantly reminds you that he told you so.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

First Nests

It was a great delight to record, on February 17th, the first nests of the year: one a blackbird's already two-thirds built, the other a song-thrush's which was begun on the morning of that day. The thrushes began to build about eight o'clock, perhaps earlier, in the morning, and they went on indomitably all through a day that faded from sun and frost to drizzle and misery in the early afternoon. They chose a crook in a hedge of macrocarpa, about breast height, and by noon they were entering and leaving at, roughly, intervals of one minute. It was curious to note how short their radius of excursion was; not more than forty or fifty yards in any direction. But within that compass they worked with inspired vitality, foraging tirelessly in a winter-sodden landscape that gave them no help at all. By afternoon they had roughed in the skeleton shape of the nest with old grass and straw and dead shoots of viola and campanula. They wrestled once with a twig of willow that would have been ample burden for a rook, then dropped it, then gave it up, then came back for it, and finally triumphed. It was a display of passion and industry that set them apart from every other bird within sight, a fascinating and miraculous performance, doubly courageous and doubly beautiful for taking place against a background that had in it, that day, hardly a single perceptible and decent flicker of the light of spring.

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Frumenty

Who, nowadays, ever eats frumenty? I remember my father begging my mother to make frumenty, and to make it properly, to boil it long and slow, so that the wheat would have just the right rich tender consistency. But she had to buy her wheat, and how could wheat bought in a shop, and probably grown in Canada, compare with that fat English grain gleaned by hand in September harvest fields? Somehow our frumenty was never right, and my father resigned himself at length to a life without it. The word is from *frumentum*, wheat, and is corrupted, in various districts, to furmenty, furmety, fumerty, fromenty, and formity, though the process of concoction is not varied much. Whole wheat grains are par-boiled in water, then stewed slowly in milk and flavoured at last with cinnamon, sugar and sultanas. It is a rich, satisfying dish and it shared with pancakes, mincepies, figs, and simnel cakes especially, the honour of being eaten in country places on a particular day. Frumenty was always served on Mothering Sunday, which is Mid-Lent Sunday or Simnel Sunday, and in the West country it was sold in markets and, in some parts, eaten with a sauce of yoke of egg and brandy. It seems also to have been eaten on Ash Wednesday, but I have a feeling that this age of quotas and patent cereals knows it no longer.

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Fig Sunday

Similarly I have a feeling that no one now, in country places, eats figs on Palm Sunday. Once we would no more miss figs on Palm Sunday than we would miss eggs at Easter. The custom was regularly and almost religiously kept in country homes of all classes, right down to and even after the War, in Buckinghamshire, Hertford, Bedford, Northamptonshire, Oxford and Wiltshire. At Kempton, in Hertfordshire, there was a public assembling of villagers for fig eating and the drinking of healths. On Dunstable Downs large crowds gathered, and I believe still do gather, to eat figs and enjoy the view. Fig-pudding was a customary dish in Hertfordshire on that day. In Wiltshire villagers gathered to eat figs and drink cider. The custom seems inexplicable, since it was surely the leaves of date-palms and not of fig-trees that were strewn down for Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

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A Sad Tree

How the sallow and the willow, traditionally trees of melancholy, became so firmly established as emblems of rejoicing it is hard to say. Newton, in his *Herball for the Bible*, suggests it was because "at that time of the yeare all other trees, for the most part are not blowen or bloomed." But, oddly enough, yew and box, traditional for the dead, were also used in Palm Sunday processions, and mezereon and daffodils, and the observance of it all was strict: "He that hath not a palm in his hand on Palm Sunday must have his hand cut off." But how the sallow and willow became, in the first place, to be emblems of sadness is something which I find still harder to fathom. They have always seemed to me gay trees, true symbols of resurrection, of first light after the tomb of winter. They are, with the daffodil, the perfect spring emblems of rejoicing. Yet the willow has been held from time immemorial as "a sad tree, whereby such who have lost their love make their mourning garlands, and we know that exiles hang up their harps upon such dolefull supporters." It shared with the columbine, also, the distinction of being worn by lovers who had been forsaken.

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A Splendid Salvia

Salvia Sclarea vaticana has made its belated but welcome appearance in seed catalogues. It is a biennial and is one of those many plants said to have been taken away from the gardens of the Vatican, at one time or another, in the folds of a professorial umbrella. History has not named this charming floromaniac who must have spent half his life popping in and out of the Vatican gardens with stolen plants, but I fancy he could only have been English. *S. Sclarea vaticana* is one of his best efforts. It forms a stout plant of large silvery red-veined leaves, rather like *S. turkestanica*, and throws up, from June to November, spikes of whitish-mauve flowers with large papery pink bracts. The whole plant is indomitable. Since the bracts are in reality leaves there is no fading, and the whole plant goes on until late autumn, sturdy but delicate, never fussing, always charming, seeding generously without ever being a nuisance. The leaves are also aromatic, with that rich pungency of sage-odour which is half the charm of a vast family.

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The Exclusiveness of Chelsea

Every year Chelsea seems to become more of a fashion parade, rivalling Ascot and Goodwood, than a flower-show. Exclusive, held on the most exclusive days of the week, it caters very little for the genuine flower-enthusiast who is tied hard to a job. For schoolmasters, office-workers and many others, a visit to Chelsea is about as rare as an eclipse of the sun. For such people Chelsea is only possible when Chelsea and Whitsun coincide. The Royal Horticultural Society is fully aware of this but pleads that, for a variety of reasons, it can do nothing. Actually, it seems to me, it needs to do very little. If Chelsea and Whitsun can be tolerated together one year they can, surely, be tolerated every year? Alternatively, why not open the show on Saturdays? If this huge and expensive display of garden art is worth the bother of arranging for three days it is surely worth arranging for four? I have a friend, who, proud of his thousand species of alpines, has not seen Chelsea, simply because he is a schoolmaster, for years. Chelsea should be his Mecca. He belongs far more rightly there than the lady who, looking like a millionairess, throws every nurseryman into despair and ends by buying *Primula wanda* for sixpence.

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Postscript to Fungus

My note of February 12th, on that small scarlet species of fungus that brightened January hedgerows like a child's strawberry bubble-pipe, brought a surprising shower of enlightening correspondence. From Essex a gentleman writes that it seems likely to be what he, in that district, calls the Jew's Ear, which is about as inspired and exact description as I ever hope to see. He describes it as becoming rare. At Haslemere a correspondent very kindly went to much trouble, bore my remarks into the museum there and had the Jew's Ear properly identified as *Geopyxis coccinea*, or the Scarlet Elf Cup. He also describes it as rare. From Oxford came one of those letters which, like the peace of God, pass all understanding. After not addressing me, its writer identified the Jew's Ear as *Geopyxis coccinea* (formerly *Peziza*), otherwise Moss cups, Elf cups, Soldiers caps, and Jerusalem Stars, then asked me if I were serious and finally remained anonymous. Such a display of erudition and modesty defeats me. My small strawberry bubble-pipe is, therefore, *Geopyxis coccinea*, formerly of the section *peziza*, fairly uncommon but delightful in any case, whether you have it as Jew or soldier, cup or cap, pipe or star.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

The International Committee for Bird Preservation

Fifteen years ago a group of influential bird-lovers, including Earl Buxton, Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Lord Rothschild, Dr. Gilbert Pearson and representatives from several countries in Europe, met in London to discuss what even then was an acute question: the welfare and protection of migratory birds. This committee realised that migrants are international, and that in the question of their welfare we are all inter-dependent. But for more than ten years this committee did nothing except, in its own words, "the passing of hopeful resolutions." Then came the International Ornithological Congress of 1934, held in Oxford, and the realisation that, in order to be effective at all, this work of bird-preservation must be really active and really international. This led to the complete reorganisation of the National Sections and, in 1935, of the British section in particular. That section now has its headquarters at the Zoological Society, with an impressive list of constituent societies behind it: the Royal Society, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Zoological Society, the British Ornithologists Union, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The National Trust, the Society for the Promotion of National Preserves, and the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire. Its work and aims, which I explain in the next paragraph, are of considerable importance to all bird-lovers.

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Its Purpose

During the present century small birds have, I suppose, been given more protection in civilised countries than perhaps at any time in history; whereas wild-fowl, in particular duck and geese, have suffered very greatly from the spread of civilisation and the development of more efficient means of destruction. The pursuit of duck in cars and in launches and their destruction by the barbaric punt-gun are some of the obvious means by which wild-fowl are threatened. But they are threatened by less obvious but equally insidious dangers: the draining of land; the silting up of old harbours, the discharge of waste oil at sea; the length of the Open Season in Europe; the diminution of *Zostera Marina*, on which duck feed; the collecting of eggs in Russia for use in the cinema trade. In certain places, in Spitzbergen for instance, eider-down collectors are stated to be living on ducks' eggs and to be shooting duck and geese which, in full moult, are unable to fly. All these things will, if carried on intensely enough and long enough, mean disaster to big sections of the bird population of Europe. If that happens, all bird-lovers will be poorer. But to prevent it a strong and well-organised system of international propaganda is necessary; which means money.

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An Appeal for Funds

The Committee needs that money not only to conduct a campaign of propaganda in order to induce the various Governments of Europe to act in unison; but a general census of the status of ducks and geese in every country in Europe; and a scheme for ringing duck on a large scale in order to trace their lines of migration to and from their breeding areas in spring and autumn. The last is of much importance; definite knowledge of the breeding areas of such duck as pass through or winter in the British Isles would make it possible to exert influence in the matter of protection in those areas. Much else is proposed, and other birds than duck are included in this international scheme of protection. Quail, for instance. Quail are caught in hundreds of thousands and brought to England and other European countries in the middle of the breeding season. The transportation of live birds by sea is another question. Birds are brought over in abominable conditions, to suffer cruelty and death through hunger and lack of decent humane care. The committee hopes, in conjunction with other National committees, to tackle and change this order of things. Patrons of the British section are invited at an annual subscription of three guineas; associates at an annual subscription of 10s. 6d. Subscriptions should be sent to Secretary, British Section, I.C.B.P., c/o Zoological Society of London, Regent's Park, N.W. 8.

Tunny into Quail

The quail is very abundant in Europe, but not in England, though it has been recorded, by which of course I mean shot, in almost every county. It is imported in great quantities, and even fifty years ago was said to come in at something like 40,000 a year to London alone. And of all bird stories the story of the origin of the quail is, I think, the craziest. I wish I could give the authority for this delicious bit of fancy:

"When there are great storms upon the coasts of Lybia Deserta, the sea casts up great tunnies upon the shore, and these breed worms for fourteen days, and grow to be as big as flies, then as locusts, which being augmented in bigness, become birds, called quails."

The bird also seems to have been destined for other purposes than as a dish for gourmets. It had, apparently, strange powers of creating illusion:

"Dissolve the eyes of a quail, or of the sea-tench, in a little water in a glass vessel for seven days, then add a little oyl: put a little of this in the candle, or only anount a rag, and light among the company, and they will look upon themselves like devils on fire, so that every one will run his way."

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A Lover of Fungi

I would like to add a postscript to Mr. R. A. Scott-James' article on the late Edward Garnett, who was not only a lover of literature and an authority on the passions, but also a lover of and an authority on fungi. He scorned the iron conservatism of the English countryman, who looks on all species but *Agaricus campestris* as suicidal. Edward Garnett knew, and was always trying to sample, some dozens of species of edible fungi, and he was never so happy as when poking about the beech and birch woods of the Surrey hills in search for a stew of boleti or a fry of some obscure and perhaps sinister-looking delicacy. He got his knowledge, or most of it, from the Russians who, with the Italians, are said to be the largest eaters of fungi in Europe. He delighted to tell, with his inimitable flair for the diabolical, of a fungus which, when eaten, turned the blood to water. It was an ideal dish with which to entertain, he felt, certain literary critics. It is curious to note, by the way, that the Italians are said to regard *Agaricus campestris*, our own common mushroom, as uneatable, and that the Swedes, in contradiction to the rules of certain gastronomists, make a sandwich of it. It was at Edward Garnett's table that I first tasted that sandwich, which is, gastronomist or no gastronomist, in every way delicious.

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The Charm of Peewits

I often feel that the peewit, whether poised or gathered in its winter congregations, is the best of all English medium-sized birds. It behaves, always, with extraordinary grace and volatility, careering, diving, planing, swooping, stunting, performing its decoy trick of despair and terror with such acrobatic passion that, often, it defeats itself. There is something just a fraction too expert about that performance. But it is, even so, fascinating, almost terrifying. Then peewits look charming, too, at rest: very erect and aristocratic, with their perky cockatoo cockades. But gathered in vast winter companies, they cease almost to be birds, at least individual birds. They marshal, sometimes, high up and begin to go through a prolonged series of strange manoeuvres, beautifully ordered but somehow crazy, as though they were the victims of a kind of military madness. I have seen them go up and round and over and up and round and down and up again with such beautifully drilled precision, flashing alternate black and white of wings against the blue winter sky, that it seemed uncanny. They seemed to be gathering and manoeuvring for some colossal celestial parade.

* * * *

Wild Gladiolus

The intentionally sceptical tone of my note on the wild English gladiolus had its reward. Correspondents from many parts of the New Forest have written, as I hoped they would, to tell me that *G. illyricus* is very far from being extinct. It also seems likely to flourish, in its quiet way, for a good long time yet. The secret of its haunts is as carefully guarded in Hampshire as the secret of the rare orchids is guarded in Kent. Its own natural habit of growing almost hidden by great fronds of bracken is the best kind of protection, too.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Country Crafts

We live in an age of vanishing country crafts, and no institution has done more than the Rural Industries Bureau to save such country arts and their exponents from extinction. Yet I still think that the work of this organisation, which is concerned more with craftsmen than with the general public, is not nearly well enough known. This bureau is not a society, and it does not exist for private profit. It is not concerned with the stitching of fancy tea-cosies or with moral poker-work. It is virtually a government department, aided by various grants, and it exists to help encourage and teach the genuine country craftsman whose art is in danger, either from apathy or stupidity, ignorance or competition, of dying out. It has done many admirable and courageous things for country smiths, weavers, wood-turners, wood-carvers, basket-makers and quilters. It has had the temerity to teach country craftsmen the finer points of their craft, and get away with it. It has broken down superstition and prejudice, and has found markets for the finished work. By the introduction of oxy-acetyline to country blacksmiths it revolutionised and saved one of the countryside's oldest crafts, and its discovery that the art of quilting was still being carried on by miners' wives according to traditional design and method of the Tudors was a piece of real romantic research.

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Advice for Craftsmen

Now, at its London headquarters, any country craftsman who is in difficulties or doubt may get advice on the technical side of his work or the keeping of his books, and he may see and acquire new designs. A large collection of designs is available, in photo-print form, at the cost of printing; a selection of economic and technical text-books may be borrowed; and some admirable pamphlets giving information on equipment, material, practical book-keeping and production costs are free. The designs in wrought iron are generally superb; and the traditional Tudor quilt patterns are beyond any doubt some of the loveliest examples of traditional needlework done in any country in Europe. The Victoria and Albert Museum has already shown its recognition of this by acquiring two large contemporary quilts for exhibition with its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples of the art. In a Fascist State there would, I think, be much trumpet propaganda about all this. In England a government bureau rescues one of the arts of the Tudor nobility from extinction, carefully fosters it without changing a single stitch of its traditional designs, sells £10,000 worth of its products in a single year, and scarcely anybody blows a note of praise.

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Lace-Making

One of the arts that the bureau does not foster directly, and which I feel it should foster, is the art of pillow-lace making, which is the absolute cream of all English rural crafts whatsoever. The antique shops of the Eastern Midlands get fuller and fuller, every year, with the discarded paraphernalia of this craft: the bobbin-winders, pillows, pillow-stools, pins and patterns and bobbins. It is an art that is, almost exclusively, in the hands of the very old, and there can be precious little hope of its survival unless its methods and miracles are handed on, very soon, to another generation. Old ladies who saw the public hanging of murderers and gaily recorded the fact on the bone and ivory of their bobbins have not long to go, and they hold the secret of the most delicate and intricate of all English country handicrafts, an art that can only be taught, and in Victorian times was taught, by the application of an almost cruel patience. There is much of the very finest expression of English rural life and fancy in this miraculous craft, with its bead-spangled bobbins and its frosty delicate designs of shell and honeycomb, tulip and lily, cobweb and crown.

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Cattern Tea

Recently, at a small Bedfordshire village, lace-workers met to celebrate the patron saint of all spinners, St. Catharine, by a custom known as Cattern Tea. It is not clear why they met in February, when in fact St. Catharine's Day is November 25th. Cattern was formerly kept by lace-makers in this village of "wetting the candle-block," drinking tea, eating cattern cakes, which were caraway cakes, and afterwards fiddling, dancing and eating a giant apple pie. Caraway cake seems to have been eaten in order to mark the end of seed-sowing, which was towards the end of November. It was a custom observed in Warwickshire on All Hallows; and in the same county ploughmen were given *fraise*, a sort of pancake, to commemorate the end of the sowing of beans and barley. Tusser, in his *Points of Good Husbandrie*, published in 1580, mentions this ceremonial marking of the end of wheat-sowing, and it is good to note that to seed-cake he adds the furmetie-pot.

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Water-Wheels

The making of water-wheels still continues. This, in such a highly mechanised age as ours, seems rather surprising. A man does not need a new water-wheel, if he needs one at all, every week. Water-wheels, like church bells, last for what is, as far as we need trouble about it, eternity. So I was glad to see a man, last summer, casting a water-wheel. He was a man who, as it happened, also cast church bells. Apart from the similarity, the closeness, of church and mill, perhaps there is also some similarity between bell and wheel. Both are round; both are instruments of music; both are mere useless bits of ornament without the contact of outside power. But it seems to go no further. There is no similarity between the music of bells and the music of water-wheels except, perhaps, their melancholy. And beside the massive architecture of a water-wheel a bell, however big, is a mere piece of prettiness. If all the bells in Christendom had long since been melted down we should, perhaps, hardly be worse off. But the water-wheel has been for countless centuries one of the bits of essential machinery without which sowing and ploughing and reaping and harvesting would have been as useless as flour itself without an oven. Bells, like the prayers to which they call us, are a matter of taste. Water-wheels, combined with their twin stones, are part of the eternal mechanism of necessity, cogs in man's machine for keeping himself alive.

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The Alpine Garden Society

In many ways the Alpine Garden Society is the most distinguished society of its kind in existence. Horticultural societies which worship at the feet of a single flower cannot hope to be compared with this virile catholic little organisation which deals in aristocrats from all over the world. In seven years its membership has grown to 1,600. Every quarter it issues a what it modestly calls a bulletin but which is in fact a first-class periodical devoted to alpines. In the current issue it announces some changes in this bulletin. Of these the proposed supplement of illustrations seems to me the most interesting. I am inclined to think that enthusiasm stimulated in flower-lovers by good photography far exceeds that aroused by print. I may be wrong; but this quarter's illustrations of the gigantic *Saxifraga florulenta*, *Ramondia Nataliae*, *Arnica alpina*, and other species give me an appetite that the remaining pages, with one exception, never quite arouse. This one exception is the page announcing the Society's proposed tour, in June, to Col de Lautaret in Dauphiny. A journey to that alpine paradise, for something like £1 a day, is something which ought to appeal vastly to all alpine enthusiasts who have cursed and suffered this year's nightmare among winters.

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Silver New Nothing

Grateful though I was for a load of correspondence on the identification of the fungus *Geopyxis corcinia*, I now feel that I was unwise to accept it all as gospel. For that fungus, it turns out, is not the Jew's Ear at all. The Jew's Ear ought to have been only too plain for me to see, since it is *Hirneola auricula-Judae*, of the order Tremellini. In compensation for this ignorance, I should like to point out that the Jew's Ear has, or had, a reputation as a cure for sore throats. Meanwhile the local names of fungi, so often closely allied with witchery and folk-lore, continue to delight me. *Exidia glandulosa* is witches' butter; and from a west county correspondent comes a note on the Silver New Nothing, *Pegiza Elegans*, also witch-flower, and held to be lucky.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Torrents of Spring

It is March 13th when I write: the wind in the south-west, storm clouds, a watery white sun, hail in the night, altogether the promise of a bad day. At nine o'clock I put on Wellingtons and squelched into a flooded garden. Only a week to the vernal equinox: spring. Crocuses are rain-flattened everywhere. Snowdrops, the pink Lent roses, the little dark Iris *reticulata*, a few daffodils, these are quite indomitable and stand up well. Tulips are in bud: the creamy *Kaufmaniana*, the odd cluster-headed almost blue-leaved little *Turkestanica*, the gorgeous blood-scarlet *Eichleri*. But the general effect is of some horrible, bogged, altogether miserable wilderness. The herbaceous borders stand, in parts, six inches deep in yellow rain. In the grass snowdrops and yellow crocuses grow in water and have, in fact, grown and bloomed in water for weeks, like true water-flowers. The field beyond the hedge is flooded, the sheep gone. The wind has blown steadily, with miserable consistency, from the same quarter, for four months, always the south-west. It changed briefly to the east nearly a week ago: snow; changed back to south-west: snow; changed back to north: snow; changed to south, snow again. The fat little Primula *denticulata* flowers looked like potentates, mauve-headed, wearing turbans of snow. The yellow crocuses broke through the snow-crust like spilt egg yolks. The birds' nests, begun so gaily in February, were like basins filled to the brim with snow. The birds mooned disconsolately.

* * * *

A Courageous Thrush

The nests had been discovered, as I wrote here, on February 17th. Both, it subsequently turned out, were thrushes'. Within a week it was clear that one was deserted, but by the beginning of March the second was finished: roughly a fortnight to complete, fairly slow work. We then waited for eggs, looking on the first four or five days of the month. Then the thrushes seemed to appear less frequently, and about the sixth of the month we began to give up hope. On the seventh and eighth of the month, when we caught the tail end of a blizzard, we gave up hope altogether. On the eighth the nest was brimful of snow, on the night of the eighth frozen solid, on the ninth as soggy and miserable as a cold beef-pudding. Thereafter, until the 13th, it became a mere museum piece: an oddity which had been recorded and had, sadly enough, let us down. It was our earliest nest; we had hoped much from it. Then, on the 13th, after a night of hail and smashing rain, I went to the nest out of pure idle curiosity, put my hand in, and touched eggs. There were three, milk-warm. The persistent courage of thrushes has often astonished me. Here it defeats me. I have no other comment except wonder.

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Edward Thomas Memorial

Some details of the proposed memorial to Edward Thomas have now appeared. The executive committee of the Memorial Fund met recently and decided on almost the only kind of memorial that would, I feel, have given Thomas any pleasure: "The purchase of the freehold of some height or solitary place—if practicable one familiar to and loved by Edward Thomas himself—and that this property should be presented to the National Trust with the suggestion that a clump or grove of trees should be planted on it, and that a small stone should be set up, inscribed with his name." This is almost the only possible course, remembering Thomas' indifference to the pomposities of architecture and his unequalled spirit of devotion to the English countryside. It is an odd coincidence that, at the same time, some 700 acres of land intimately associated with Richard Jefferies are up for sale. This land, lying near Surbiton golf-course, was much loved by Jefferies and described with intimacy in *Nature near London*. It would, in some ways, make a happy memorial to Thomas, though I fancy the price would be fantastic. In any case Thomas' genius calls for a remoter memorial: some hill, preferably, from which one could see an expanse of the south country he loved and described. In any case it will all cost money. I have not been asked to appeal for that money, but those interested should write to R. L. Watson, 55 Redcliffe Gardens, S.W.10.

"The Countryman's" Birthday

The Countryman has reached its tenth year. Every reader of this page, I hope, knows it. Produced on the edge of the Cotswolds, in a fine stone house that must have made many visitors' mouths water, by a man who in *England's Green and Pleasant Land* gave us a classic, it has now a circulation of 12,000, receives an almost fabulous number of bouquets from the great (unlikely fellows like Shaw included), and has innumerable imitators all over the world. It is admired by sociologists and prime ministers, was admired by Hardy, and would, I think, have been admired by Cobbett. It is non-party. It nevertheless hits hard, on occasion, and has been known to spill unpleasant beans on topics like parish government. It is illustrated, always by out-of-the way stuff, and this quarter carries photographs by Shaw himself. The only criticism I have ever offered or have ever heard offered of it is that it remains a quarterly. I should like it monthly. But in its quarterliness, its editor declares, lies its strength, and he must be right. He has increased the size of this incomparable review by almost two hundred pages in 10 years, and has reached a point, now, where advertisements threaten to swamp print. There is something in it for every sort of countryman.

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Mysteries of Wild Life

In the current issue Mr. R. M. Lockley raises an interesting question, and is gently taken to task for it by the editor (Mr. Lockley's bird articles have been one of *The Countryman's* most consistent and delightful features for years). Mr. Lockley is troubled by, and deprecates, the great fuss that certain nature lovers make over the natural mysteries of wild life: the mystery of bird migration, "the midday retirement of Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon," why the blackbird, unlike the thrush, neglects to line its nest with mud, why birds sing and such things as, though he does not mention it, the hunting of rabbits by stoats. Why trouble? says Mr. Lockley in effect. "Thank whatever gods there be that the intricate impulse works its will . . . according to a plan that all our brains together can never understand." In part, I agree with this. But I agree also with the editor, who says:

> "So, surely, might Harvey have rested satisfied with contemplating the beautiful and awesome sight of the beating of the pulse, and never have discovered the circulation of the blood."

Wonder is not enough. It is odd to hear, at this time of day, of the "birds singing to man" suggestion, as the editor of *The Countryman* goes on to say. What of, for instance, the coloration of birds' eggs? Some light on that mystery would, for me at any rate, treble wonder at it. Why are thrushes' eggs blue, blackbirds' green, yellow-hammers' scribbled? Why are the eggs of the peewit perfectly camouflaged, when the eggs of the hedge-sparrow seem painted for contrast? The Victorian naturalists smoothly passed it off as some expression of "the Divine Will" and crept out by the back door. Is it true that fear or fright can alter the colouring of an egg? that all eggs are white up to twenty-four hours before being laid?

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The Rabbit Problem

When an animal becomes so pestilential that it requires a Government Committee to deal with it then it would seem reasonable to ask that, among other things, its natural enemies should be a little encouraged, if not protected. The rabbit has now become a nuisance, in this country, comparable only with the rat. It breeds at an astounding pace, for almost twelve months of the year, and a single pair is said to multiply roughly fifty times in 12 months. The question of the best methods of rabbit-killing has been discussed over and over again: trapping, wiring, gassing, poisoning and so on. On the other hand one hears little mention of the rabbit's (and the rat's) most powerful natural enemies, stoat and weasel. The extent to which the natural law between these three animals is upset by gamekeepers is, to my mind, serious. Every keeper's gibbet bears witness to the colossal and increasing slaughter of stoat and weasel that goes on in the business of preservation. In this way the rabbit is becoming more and more an animal enjoying a special degree of protection. The country is paying for this, and must go on paying for it so long as stoat and weasel are judged to be vermin.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

The Fens

The Fens, now so much in the news, have always had an evil reputation. They make a remote, desolate country, once stricken with its own terrible low sickness, bitterly bleak, with great sombre distances pricked only by spiky pollard willows, windmills and an occasional church spire. It is some of the strangest country in England. From Ely cathedral (stricken itself with crazy crackings from sinkages and said to be built straight on flat earth, without foundations) the land looks, on a winter day, in some way unearthly and abandoned, as though the sea had washed over it and back again. Its villages, except where the hideous local brick is used, are charming, and they get still more charming as you go up the river, out of Cambridgeshire into Huntingdonshire, where the cottages are the prettiest coloured in England. Brick and slate give way to plaster and reed-thatch, the plaster colour-washed in all sorts of shades from deep terra-cotta through strawberry and petticoat-pink and stone and cream to white and even blue. It is very curious that in Holland, in the same kind of country, houses are similarly coloured. This craze for colouring goes on right down into Bedfordshire, where it ends with abruptness on the edge of the stone country. It is one of the most charming things in English rural architecture, a delightful expression of gaiety in a countryside which, almost perpetually water-washed, has no natural brilliance of colouring at all.

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The Hundred Foot Drain

The fight against flooding in the Fens is something which has gone on, unceasingly, throughout the history of civilised England. Scores of drains, sixteen foot, twenty foot, forty foot, cut across it, on the map, like crazy slashes of blue pencil, and from Earith to Downham Market runs what still is, to my mind, one of the most remarkable engineering feats ever performed on the English countryside: the great Hundred Foot drain, as straight for thirty miles as though laid by a ruler. Begun by Charles I and finished by Cromwell with his prisoners of war, it is still in advance, both in scale and utility, of anything ever attempted since. It is a colossal achievement, as you realize most fully when you see that it runs, in parts, almost the height of a house above the surrounding countryside. And here, once, it was possible to prove and was proved, by the simple experiment of watching a ship sail down that long straight stretch of water, that the earth was not flat. It was the only place, inland, in the whole of England, where that experiment could have been performed. From the latest reports it is clear that the whole Fen situation is very desperate indeed; the Hundred Foot Drain is said to have broken its banks at one point, and the affair has become not only a local but a national disaster. It is more than time that the control of the area became national, too. The Ouse Catchment Board, hampered by lack of funds, works nobly; but the Fens are watered not by one river, but by half a dozen.

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The Upper Ouse

Out of the Fens, higher up, the Ouse runs through sleepy idyllic country, still flattish, never in any way spectacular, but still some of the best country of its kind in England. The river turns and doubles back in its course, with broad slow sweeps between primrose woods, squat-churched villages and water-mills. Never navigated here, except by the pleasure boats of summer afternoons, it nourishes a wonderfully rich flower life. Its water lilies are a great delight. They dam the stream, in midsummer, with great swan-white stretches. They conjure a multitude of similies: they are so simple and perfect, both in colouring and shape, that they defeat and tangle metaphor. Closed, not yet free of water, they come up exactly like creamy-green buds of magnolia, unwrithing themselves from stems that are like a tangle of water-snakes. Half open, more yellow than white, more stamen then petal, they are like white China peonies. Full open, in full sun, they shine from a distance like nothing so much as a vast frying of eggs turned out in the great olive platters of the leaf-pads. It is a simile of shocking banality, but it springs spontaneously to mind, and the spontaneity of similies is everything. Then, closer, they are like great cups of milk-white glass, the bright concentration of stamens almost luminous, in the sun, with pollen-fire. They look very unreal then, unreal and unattainable, not flowers so much as modellings of flowers. They have a kind of touch-me-not artificiality about them, an unearthly and visionary fragility.

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The Parish Council

Though the work of parish councils is something which very rarely gets into any but local papers, the parish meeting is often a piece of rare sport for the countryman. Such was ours on March 15th, when the old council retired and the new was elected. Sport was promised on the question of preserving open spaces. Some land presented to the parish by a wealthy landowner had, it was felt, been misused. The retiring chairman received a fairly rough handling and looked relieved, in the end, at being deprived of so tough an office. I complained bitterly and forcibly about the unnecessary cutting down of certain trees; a paper-worker felt that public money had been ill-spent; a gardener jumped up and asked Mr. Chairman what did we pay rates for, &c., &c.? The result was that the paper-worker, the gardener, and myself found ourselves on the new council. For me it was an honour. Unlike many townsmen who bluster and blunder into village life on the assumption that village people have, without exception, turnips on their shoulders, I have always had a great respect for rural intelligence. It is a mistake to force oneself into village life. Countrymen, at heart, despise the townee squire who crashes his way on to parish councils, lets the money fly and in the end cannot or will not keep it up. There is nothing so cold as the scrap heap of village opinion.

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Trespassing

A correspondent writes: "Is it not a fact that trespassing is not an offence, that damage must be proved and that one is perfectly within one's rights if one offers the sum of threepence to the landlord or his representative?" The answer is, I think, no. This very pretty theory is commonly held, but its chances of working out in practice or of being upheld in a court are, I fancy, very small indeed. First, trespassing itself is an offence—"to enter upon another man's land without lawful authority is in itself a tort actionable without proof of any actual damage." Secondly, although the forcible removal of a trespasser is itself an assault, it may be justified if the force used can be proved to have been reasonable. Thirdly, as the *Week-End Book* so well advises, it is better, when asked, to go and go gracefully, while the time and the going are good. This is the soundest advice of all, though I never act upon it myself, and those who contemplate an Easter in the country might do worse than bear it in mind. But they would do well to bear something more important in mind: namely, that it is now an offence, in most counties, to uproot and take away the wild flowers and ferns of the district. In certain cases it is even an offence to pick the wild flowers of the district. And though I have never believed that the mere picking of bluebells, for instance, was one of the causes of their extermination, the wholesale uprooting and plucking of wild flowers seems, of all forms of vandalism, perhaps the most stupid.

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Natives from Seed

This uprooting of wild flowers is never worth the candle. Bluebells can become, in gardens, as great a nuisance as couch-grass. In soil that suits them they increase with great rapidity, forming masses of bulbils that are a nightmare to eradicate. In any case they may be bought, by those who like them in cultivation, for as little as ten shillings a thousand. The little wild daffodil may be had for the same price. Primroses may be raised with absurd ease, and in many colours, from seed. Brooms (uprooted, they never live) are almost as easy, and will grow to ten feet in two years. *Anemone pulsatilla*, that delicious but now rare native, almost like a silver-haired mauve tulip, is always best when left alone, and it will flower well and easily in one year from seed (sixpence a packet). All the native geraniums, the charming pink *G. lancastriense* included, are easily raised and just as cheap. Shore flowers and marsh flowers are rarely happy in gardens. The striking native yellow horned poppy becomes, in fat soil, away from its native shingle, less like a poppy than some flabby silvery cabbage, and sea-pinks a hiding place for slugs.

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