

Once Bittern, Twice Shy

The south-westerly wind, cold and promising rain, was picking up. The early January light muted by thick scudding cloud. Wind chop in the Channel hit the long shingle bank of Dungeness Point with a distant sighing crash. The sky was a vast palette of shifting greys, if anyone cared to look. If they had time. If they could stop thinking about the big draw, about the ultimate objective. Bitterns.

The day before we had seen a bittern fly over the Burrowes pit to pull up sharp and drop into a small patch of washed-out ochre reeds to instantly disappear. I strained through rented binoculars willing the bittern to show itself. Even the guy with the Swarovski scope couldn't locate it.

Still, we had, in however a fleeting way, seen this most elusive of birds. Flying low, lighter in colour than I had expected, a delicate off-white goldy ochre. A strong flier, lazy even in its competence, but not sleek, somehow rumped. And then gone, into the reed bed, as if it were never there.

Today was different. Colder. Rawer. Bleaker. A whiff of Arctic air even in the south-westerly flow. The sparse vegetation rooted in the shingle landscape drew itself in and endured – sally willow, bramble, carpet moss, colonising lichens and reeds, fringing and filling the scrapes and pits. Scrawny rabbits ran slow on this harshest of winter's starve-acre diets. Nature's larder already desperately low after a month of ice and snow.

In the visitor centre a kindly woman had pointed us in the direction of Scott hide. She said it was a day you could hardly not see bittern. The reserve's team reckoned eleven birds were over-wintering and the whiteboard listed daily sightings. Pulses quickened.

We stumped our way, double and triple layered, under thrown-up, rabbit-riddled banks to Scott hide. Always that moment of anticipation pushing the flimsy door. Just two guys inside.

We sat ourselves down and looked out, glad to be out of the wind. Far in the distance on slight islands cormorants gathered, big black-backed gulls stood, crows landing amongst them, flights of teal whistling in, mute swans and gangling signets, too old to stay, too young to go, greylag geese overhead honking and calling. Closer in ubiquitous coots, tufted ducks, shovellers and three duck (as opposed to 'drake') smew. Like miniature mergansers with shorter bodies and bills, beautiful sienna heads, diving and diving into that cold hostile water. One bobbing up with a good-sized perch – turn and catch and get it down. One in amongst the reeds right in front of us. And way off in the crook of the corner of the pit a drake, resplendent in all his white dazzling glory.

We ask the guys if they've seen bittern. 'No', replies the older one, 'but a water rail walked right in front of the hide but ten minutes ago. And the other day...' The fabled other day, the other day that was his and not ours, that was gone and not now, that left flavour but no food – well, the other day a bittern had landed right in front of the hide, not ten yards away, and larked about, casual as you like catching perch for

an hour. 'That was the day', he said, but in a conciliatory, encouraging sort of way. The other guy says, in a strong country accent, 'But have you seen the Smew there?' Which, by now of course we had, although the day before we had not heard of the word let alone the duck.

His voice reminded me of country men, the men who held nature at bay along tiny back lanes, kept the ditches open, the brambles back, the verges tended, with sickle and stick. Already men of the past in my youth, black trousers tied below the knee, heads snow white under caps and felt hats. Men who watched and kept their tiny bit of order ordered, paid by the County. Now its all flails and JCBs and ploughs running edges straight.

His voice reminded me of Vic Adams (poacher) and Bill Tofts (labourer) shocking me to the core with the filth of their language when as a young boy I sought refuge on our super-size allotment on the edge of barren fields of wheat, beet and barley. Vic teaching me to use hawthorn twigs and thorn to start a fire, even on the wettest day. Pull the dead bits from the hedge, he'd say, not the ground. Last time I saw him, he'd lost his mind, standing forlorn in Fulbourn asylum and me not knowing what to do with myself, my dad pushing me forward. He'd worn back-to-front, toe to heel, boots to throw gamekeepers off his trail, or so he said. We thought he was coming but instead he was going, going.

The older man breaks the silence. Mutters something about Petham or Pelham and the sanderlings he'd seen there recently. Says, hoping to see the rail again, we can always do a little cheat. And takes a mobile phone out of his waterproof and shoves it out the hide window and plays the call of the Water Rail. To me he says, 'You might laugh but its worked before. I had two Cetus [warblers] come right down in front of me.' But not this time.

I had seen the Water Rail two days before and once at Wicken. He'd just clambered up the shingle bank in front of me, the hide so crowded I was at the back corner. Elusively visible – his legs burn a dusty, setting-winter-sun red in my memory, lighter, more agile, more leggy – like a colt – than a moorhen. And then before 'There's a Water Rail' was out of my mouth he was gone, disappearing into the willow scrub.

By now the cold was more than creeping in. The old chap said he'd seen a black-headed gull at Makepeace hide up the way, stood down by the water shivering. I had too, and it did not look long for this world. He said, with a chuckle, that he felt like it, frozen bloody cold. He'd have a coffee in the visitor centre and get on home.

We left soon after, bone cold and bladder full, with rain now peppering the gale. We hurried back to the car park, fumbling through all those the layers in the freezing toilet block and drank coffee and ate last-of-the-turkey sandwiches in the car with the motor running and heater on.

The bird feeders hanging from the willow scrub in front of us were alive with darting, impatient hungry birds: blue tits, great tits, a plethora of chaffinch, more bank-robber faced march buntings than you could shake a stick at, and earlier – yes, on that other day – brambling and a tree sparrow.

The weather seemed set for the day, the early afternoon but a passageway to the darker room of night. As we'd broken from the hide for the car we'd rushed along the shingle path, the driven rain catching our breath. Back along beneath the bank, rabbits gone to ground, when a bird swirls up from behind it – goldy ochre – and we both said 'Bittern' and fumbled for our binoculars as the gale pushed him away. He banked and controlled the wind, and cut down behind the burnished red of willows that obscured the view. I wanted to run, to see him land, to maintain that fleeting, briefest of contacts, to somehow possess in those few seconds something, a burnt image on my retina, some communication, acknowledgement, essence. But he was gone again. And even with my new binoculars bought that morning on the reserve I was a man searching for needles in haystacks.

'Stick or twist?' we said in the car's growing warmth. 'Home or one more hide?' It was obvious and we drove the short sandy track to the ARC hide, the car park disappointingly full. We hurried through the rain on a raised track between sodden reed beds. Something scrambles across the road twenty yards from us and down the other side. 'A rail for sure', I say. And as we approach the spot we search but know that she will have pushed through the reeds and swum silently away.

This hide has a double door – double anticipation – but it is empty and dark. We open a window slot and look out on calmer water. Reeds and willows edge the pit, a concrete water tower in the distance. Female smew, pochard, gooseander, mute swans, coots. We scan the reeds, the banks, the willows, the darkening sky. But no bittern.

Two men come in. We look up the lake. They look across it. We get talking behind our binoculars – Smew – yes; Bearded Tit – no. And then one of them says – almost as if he's just found his car keys in pretty much the usual place, 'It's there. A bittern. Right down there.' We rush over, proximity and personal space a meaningless convention between us, them, and the bittern.

He says, 'It's there' but all I see is a reed bed, bulrushes this time, with a trampled, broken area in front at maybe fifteen yards. In front of that the high stalks and dead fronds of Rosebay Willowherb sway in the wind. 'There he is', he says to his mate, who still can't find him. He points and directs him. All I can see is reeds, bloody wet soaking, reeds, the bulrush heads blowing out, the rain coming down. And then I see the bittern, crouched down, beak tipped to the sky, head turned to look towards the hide, clay-red-ringed staring eye staring at me. From ten yards. Absolutely still. *Botaurus Stellaris*. The bird with the bull call and starry plumage.

Jo can't find him. I get behind her and sight the bittern along my pointed finger. After all the waiting it seems to take an eternity to see the thing, even though he is there, right in front of us.

For the next half hour we watch the bittern. One of eleven on the reserve, one of maybe a hundred in the country. A bird that was extinct in the UK in 1900, that recolonised in the 1950s sparsely and then declined until it was feared there were no breeding pairs left. And he stands in front of us doing his bitterny thing.

Which, to be honest, over the half hour, is not much.

His plumage is fantastic, thick, and perfect. The abundant neck and shoulder feathers are very fine and remind me of a woman with a fur stole. The strong gusts of the dying wind catch the feathers and lift them, revealing a soft downy luxuriance.

The markings of the feathers are remarkable. On the goldy ochre background are stronger and darker arrowhead markings running vertically. Take your eyes away for a moment and the bittern has blended so perfectly into the backdrop that he has magically gone. Only with great effort does the eye pick him out again.

He stands pretty much stock still on thick yellow-green scaly legs, gripping the reeds beneath him. His beak is maybe six inches long – shorter than a Grey Heron's and a dusty, olive, ivory-like green with finely incised nostrils. Balanced and very sharp.

He stands hunched. Then he stretches up, head back, beak to the sky. He lowers his head and looks straight at us, His eyes set in his skull at an angle so he can look down for fish. He occasionally works a slightly retching movement in his throat as if he is about to eject a ball of fish bone. At one point he stretches up, sinks down, half raises his wings, seems very intent and then relaxes back into a hunch.

And so it goes. We hear the nearby traffic passing. The two guys leave. We try taking pictures with our mobile phones. We dare take our eyes away. We look with our naked eyes, with our binoculars, and the bittern just stays there. Silent, occasionally moving. Never ceasing in his attentiveness. We glory in his magnificence, in his bittern-ness. Jo. Me. And the bittern.

And I begin to wonder how it will end. Will we be here in the dying fag-end light of the winter day straining to see the unmoving bittern. Time stands still. Four swans come flying in, their wings sighing. The rain stops. The wind slackens. The sun slips underneath the clouds towards the western horizon.

And then the bittern stretches up, having never closed an eye for a second. As it stands it exposes its upper leg, strangely like a drumstick, almost bare and unfeathered. And then it lifts one of its long feet and moves a leg forward. Immediately it loses its statuesque immobility and poise as it cantilevers over to one side, the floating reeds beneath it failing to hold its weight. It turns and takes another ungainly step and we realise how vulnerable it is, neither on land nor water, but clutched to reeds, its long grasping feet seeming clumsy once loosed from a solid hold. It makes another couple of faltering sinking steps and takes off in a stumbling manner. But it is soon airborne and with a few lazy flaps of its wings it flies low over the water to another reedbed and disappears.

We sit in the silence and look at each other and smile. In that half hour we have had the hide and the bittern to ourselves. We pull our things together and walk back to the car. The rain has stopped. The cloud has broken on the western horizon and the sun is falling slowly into the sea.

It is four o'clock on the 4th of January 2011.

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