

## Curlews and Epiphany

It is only January but nature is already restless. The days of lengthening darkness are over and I find myself looking skywards, trying to discern just a little more colour, a slightly stronger hue. The birds are feeling it too. On the feast of the Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the first curlew was seen back on its breeding grounds on Coombe Hill in Gloucestershire. Even though the winter floods are still with us and the fields are standing pools that reflect a grey sky, this curlew's urge to establish its territory in readiness for breeding is strong. It is way ahead of the game; the others, even its mate, may not arrive until mid February. The ground is sodden. It feeds by probing its long, sensitive bill into liquid mud and sleeps knee deep in cold water, but it has staked its claim before its rivals have, metaphorically, got out of bed.

This lone bird is a sign of reassurance and hope. Reassurance because the earth is still turning and the great pendulum of life is still swinging to and fro in tune with the lengthening and shortening of the days, as it always has. And hope because, despite everything, wading birds like curlews can still find a little bit of the earth that has the space and peace they need to survive. Some of them anyway. It is good to see this curlew on Coombe Hill, all seems right in the world of waders at this moment in time, in this little spot on our planet. 'Hope is a thing with feathers, that perches in the soul,' wrote Emily Dickinson. Yes, it is, a fragile, indefinable thing that flutters and sways in a storm, but still holds fast to the human heart. Hope is a baby born into poverty in an outpost of an empire, vulnerable and dependent. Hope is also a bird with a curved beak, that stands its ground in mud and water and sings beautiful songs.

Wading birds are tough little creatures. The Eurasian curlew is our largest wader, about the size of a duck with long legs and an elongated, arcuate bill. Others, like dunlin and knot, are tiny, sparrow sized birds. During the darkest months of the year they can withstand driving rain and freezing winds in what seem to us to be inhospitable and wild places. They love mudflats by a winter-cold sea. Come the spring, they breed on moorland and mountainside where, even then, the weather can chill us to the bone. Many waders fly hundreds or even thousands of miles between their wintering and breeding grounds. How can small bodies cope with such extremes? But cope they do, and the proof is on Coombe Hill.

A curlew on mud may not be the most awe-inspiring sight, but wait until they sing. Go to Coombe Hill from March to June in particular, and both your ears and emotions will be accosted by the fluty, tumbling, spiralling cadences of a curlew's mating call. It is an astonishing sound, half yearning, half joyful – it is hard to define. Many people have tried to capture the call of the curlew in various artistic ways and all of them have come to different conclusions. Ecstatic, passionate, longing, joyful, grief-stricken are just a few - curlews tangle our emotions, at times reminding us of long, warm days of sunshine, at others they bring to mind sorrow and despair. 'Such trifling things as life and death are kept in Curlew's calls...' wrote A. W. Bullen in his poem 'Curlews'. 'If my voice could be anything like theirs... if only... I would swallow my share of lugworms to know their truths...'

So, here comes the sad bit. In December 2015, the Eurasian curlew, our curlew, was put onto the red list of endangered species. It is now categorised as Near Threatened, meaning extinction is likely in the near future. It is the same category as Jaguars. Over the last twenty years the UK has lost half of its breeding curlews, over 5,000 fewer birds arrive on their breeding grounds each year, making the sighting at Coombe Hill even more wonderful. The reasons are many and varied, but can all be categorised as human-induced. Changing in farming practices, loss of habitat and spread of commercial forestry are the main ones. These sweeping alterations to the landscape, especially during the last half of the twentieth century, also increased the numbers of generalist predators like foxes, crows and badgers, all of which eat the eggs and chicks of ground nesting birds like curlews. It is heart-breaking to see them disappear because of our actions. It is hard to know what to do when faced with such huge issues as the way we farm the land to produce food for an ever-growing human population, but doing nothing isn't an option. In January 2016, I started to make plans.

April 21<sup>st</sup> was day one of my 500 mile walk from the west coast of Ireland to the east coast of England to raise awareness about the decline of the Eurasian curlew. It is an auspicious day for a few reasons, but I chose it primarily because it is the feast day of a little-known saint, St Beuno (pronounced Bayno). Beuno was a sixth century abbot who helped establish Christianity throughout Wales. Legend has it that one day he was sailing between the Llyn Peninsula and Anglesey when he dropped his prayer book into the sea. A curlew flew over, picked it up and carried it to the shore to dry. The saint was so grateful he blessed the curlew and decreed it must always be protected. Well, that blessing worked well for nigh on 2000 years, but needed a refresh. I knew St Beuno would approve of helping to save them.

I began in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, walked down to Southern Ireland and then through the centre, arriving in Dublin a couple of weeks later. I sailed to Holyhead, walked through Wales and into England, taking a detour to see an inspirational curlew recovery project in Shropshire (Curlew Country), and then ended this odyssey on the coast of Lincolnshire at the end of May. On the way, I visited places where curlews still sing and soar on stiffened wings over fields and moorland, but also stood in fields now empty of their calls. I talked to conservationists, artists, scientists, musicians, writers, gamekeepers, anyone who had an interest in protecting these lovely birds. But it wasn't just for my own interest, out of it came a series of ground-breaking 'Curlews in Crisis' Workshops that bring together various groups who have the well-being of curlews at their heart. They summarise what is happening, explain the science and conservation and propose solutions. The first one was in Southern Ireland in November 2016, and resulted in an Irish Curlew Task Force. This is much needed as numbers of curlews have fallen in the Republic from 5,000 breeding pairs in the 1980s to just 120 today. The second was held in February 2017, at the headquarters of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust headquarters in Simbridge in Gloucestershire. The third is in a couple of weeks' time, on January 24<sup>th</sup> in Builth Wells in Wales, and the Scottish Workshop is happening in September of 2018. It is early days, but already curlew chicks are fledging from places that haven't seen successful breeding for years. These are small signs – but they are undoubtedly hope for the future. And, we now have a much clearer picture of what is happening to curlews throughout the UK and Ireland and what needs to be done to bring them back from the brink.

In Laudato si Pope Frances urges us to care for the natural world in heartfelt and poetic words. For the first time his instructions are clear and demand concrete action. Chapter 1, para 42:

Greater investment needs to be made in research aimed at understanding more fully the functioning of ecosystems and adequately analyzing the different variables associated with any significant modification of the environment. Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another. Each area is responsible for the care of this family. This will require undertaking a careful inventory of the species which it hosts, with a view to developing programmes and strategies of protection with particular care for safeguarding species heading towards extinction.

Curlews are just one species among many that are suffering so badly. In the last fifty years the earth has lost half its mass of wildlife. Half the number of birds sing, insects hum and flowers bloom than when I was a child. Every single one of us is asked to do what we can, no matter how seemingly small. Nothing is wasted, everything makes a difference. We are asked to be salt for the earth, to bring flavour and depth to a world that is losing its vibrancy. By protecting life on earth every single human will be blessed by beauty, colour and sound, we will be awe-struck and our souls will marvel at the majesty of the earth. That is the joy, and the duty, of being a Christian.

### **Useful websites**

Irish Curlew Task Force: <https://www.npws.ie/research-projects/animal-species/birds/curlew-task-force-august-2017>

Curlew Country Shropshire: <http://curlewcountry.org>

Southern England Curlew Forum: <http://www.curlewcall.org>

World Curlew Day is now designated as April 21<sup>st</sup>.

Curlew Moon – 500 miles for curlews. Out April 19<sup>th</sup>, published by Harper Collins and Illustrated by Jessica Holm.

In 2017 I was awarded the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) medal for Outstanding Communication in Science for my curlew work.