

Look to the Skies



by Daniel LionHeart
The Bard of Steward Wood

Dedication

I dedicate this book to the birds in and around Steward Wood, thanking them for their company, their beauty, their inspiration, their teaching and their mystery.

I also thank my many other human and non-human teachers who have helped me to grow, to build connections, and to find my place in the world. And lastly I acknowledge with gratitude and love the Bardic tradition in Britain, my ancestors and those who will come after me.

May all beings be happy, be at peace, be filled with love and shine their light into the world.

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July 2012

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A Bard is a person who weaves the past, present and future of their people, land and gods through story, song, music and poetry; Bards can also represent all peoples, all stories, all emotions; a Bard raises the Awen ('flowing spirit', inspiration), and is a practitioner of Gramarye (magical language and the magic of language); a Bard is a seer and shape-shifter; finally a Bard promotes peace, reconciliation, understanding and healing. Traditionally, a Bard was of 12 years experience and training and was the winner of a Bardic chair.

Look to the Skies

Look to the Skies
You might be surprised
At what you see -
Peregrines in the city,
Buzzards 'a circlin'
Flappy things of all kinds -
residents, migrants, those passing through -
Then look back to the Earth
To spot a shrew -
That's owl food!

Pellets, pellets, pellets, poo
Don't forget them too
Underneath perches
Hanging out on rocks -
Chance to figure out
What the bird's been eating about:
Purple poo for ivy berries
Owls spew fur and bone
A sparrowhawk leaves simply matted feathers
And corvids grass and stone;
Many clues and objects take you to the source
Then field guides are an additional resource;
And if you get lucky
Nest, eggs and chicks
Could keep you transfixed.

So remember -
Look to the Skies
You might be surprised
At what you see.

Sparrowhawk

Accipiter nisus

Sleek, elusive killer -
You tantalise me
With glimpses,
With flybys,
With yikking so rarely heard.

Your world is secretive;
a serial killer of birds and chicks,
so you need to be one step ahead of the rest.

What can it be like to be always met with alarm, with silence?
Then,
with an explosion of feathers,
success!
And what success!

I am teased by you
I am fascinated in you
I am your student, devotee
But with an arm's length respect
For could I be so primal?
Civilisation has seeped into my bones.
But you remind me of where I come from
Which draws me to you.

You bring nobility, stature,
Dignity and pride;
A sense of upliftment.

Your elusiveness means
When you do appear
The moment is intensified -
My heart feels a thrill,
A tingle runs up the spine.

Can I ever know you?
Probably not.
But I will always admire you and your kind;
You who hold a sacred place in the balance of things -
Keeping us all alert, aware, engaged -
Maintaining health and harmony
For the benefit of all.

The Time of Owl

Tawny Owl
Strix aluco

A piercing cry -
Welcome to the night,
The time of Owl.

Silent hunter;
Roosting by day
Active at night
Rarely seen
Oft heard.

You who come equipped with high-tech aural detection,
able to pinpoint the scuffling of a mouse
from a far-off perch,
I honour thee.
By night, you are the woodland's supreme avian predator,
swooping in silence on unsuspecting prey.

Loathed by crows, blackbirds and the like
You can get a raucous reception by day,
For you snatch their eggs and chicks;
A young squirrel or rabbit is a feast,
Small birds a treat,
And worms are tasty too.

You are the night's watchmen
And everything is afeared of ye.

A piercing cry -
Welcome to the night,
The time of Owl.



Cheeky Chappy – a male Chiffchaff at Steward Wood

Cheerful Chiffchaff

Phylloscopus collybita

Cheeky chappy,

With your bobbing tail and olive hues -

You took the Easy Jet from the Med to be with us.

The arrival of your bright song marks the Equinox;

Once again, you become the woodland metronome!

Leaf picker,

Gleaner of insects,

You are phylloscopic!

Why do you abandon your mate so?

When your copulating's done, you leave it all to her -

Poor hen!

Your place is in the trees, hers near the ground -

Never to cross paths again.

Yours is one of total parental abstinence -

Cheeky bugger!

Well, I welcome you to this wood,

And admire your cheerful ways,

Your comic jig.

And it's sad to see you go,

So please come back next year.

Remember, we're only a short jet hop away!



Buzzard

by Ted Hughes

Big hands, big thumbs, broad workaday hands
Darkened with working the land
Kneading the contours, squeezing out rats and rabbits.

Most of the day elongates a telephone pole
With his lighthouse lookout and swivel noddle.

O beggared eagle! O down-and-out falcon!
Mooning and ambling along hedgerow levels,
Forbidden the sun's glittering ascent -

As if you were sentenced to pick blackberries
At Easter, searching so fearful-careful,
So hopeless-careless, rag-wings, ragged trousers.

Too low-born for the peregrine's trapeze, too dopey
For the sparrowhawk's jet controls -
Where's the high dream when you rode circles

Mewing near the sun
Into your mirror-self – something unearthly
Lowering from heaven towards you?

Buzzard sits in mid-field, in mild sunlight,
Listening to tangled tales, by mole and by bee,
And by soft-headed dandelion.

When he treads, by chance, on a baby rabbit
He looks like an old woman
Trying to get her knickers off.

In the end he lumbers away
To find some other buzzard, maybe older,
To show him how.

It feels to me that in this poem Ted has a downer on the Buzzard which may well simply reflect the mood he was in at the time. I felt the Buzzard was misrepresented and found him/her speaking back.

Buzzard – a riposte to Ted's appraisal of my life

I curl away upwards
Riding that thermal
With broad hands outstretched;

I do because I can
I can because I do -
Simple;
Thanks be to God.

S/he also gave me a talent and a job:
To find and destroy rats and rabbits -
not out of malice,
it's simply my being:
part of nature's many checks and balances.

Yea, sure, I haven't got thje show-off agility of Brother Sparrowhawk,
Or dazzling speed of Sister Peregrine;
But I don't need them – I get by, in my workaday way.
I'm an opportunist and a scavenger – what's wrong with that?
I have a hunter's eye.
You could learn something from my ways, so observe.

I've sensed it with you humans time and time again:
Your heart is lifted by viewing my soaring;
My mews call you to the Sky, your Father, from your humdrum brainstate.

I am majestic, imperial, unafraid to be visible, to be audible;
And my corvid challengers allow me, yes *me*,
To display *my* aerobatic abilities under pressure.
You are impressed.
To me this is all simply Life -
Why judge one way against another?
All is equally beautiful, powerful, when it comes from Being,
And it has a purpose.
Tell me, what's yours?

Buteo buteo

Ravens Revisited

Greater Rocks, Dartmoor
28th April 2012

Raven on rock
Resolution of the opposites: flesh and stone;
This is Raven's domain
And I an intruder.

But peek at the nest I must [set on a ledge on a cliff-face]
So I endure the flapping and the squarking
Just above my head -
He is not amused.

Just when an attack seems imminent,
The tension eases
And Father Raven engages in harrying jackdaws -
A favourite pursuit.

So I get to peer down on the nest
In sudden tranquility;
The three juveniles fill that mass of sticks -
Dozing siblings, half awake,
Having no needs for now.

I take in their size -
Wow, haven't they grown! [from my previous visit three weeks ago]
Big beaks and full feathers,
Tender vulnerability gone.

Realising my time is up -
No wish to offend -
I scale back down
To leave the Ravens as King
And Queen
Of this place.

Corvus corax

Dartmoor Corvus

Greater Rocks, Dartmoor
28th April 2012

The landscape is big and mythic;
Raven is old, old
Older perhaps than the rocks
Which form his perch.

He is *spiritus rector*, a guardian presence,
With his black mantle framed by the grey sky.

Fifty thousand years of gobbling the living and the dead, a constant at the battlefield, make Raven a companion to putrefaction. Equally a skilled hunter and scavenger, Raven is resourceful.

Black is strong medicine – it is an entry into the dark realms,
a hint of death.

To be 'in the dark' is to be confused, unsettled, lost;
amid scorched earth, barren.

Meanwhile, the dark has great depth; it's a place of richness, of treasure,
of digging up ancient wisdom; a place of womb sustenance.

In his blackness, Raven carries colour -
With close contact, the purples, blues and reds emerge -
A reward for going beyond the obvious, the everyday.

Raven is ancient
A totem of this land
The guardian of this place.



Blackcap

Sylvia atricapilla

**Hello Blackcap with your torpedo head
And flashy song;
It's great to catch sight of you;
You're not keen to be seen
As you warble in the undergrowth
Or from a perch.**

The Blackcap's song is a rich, fluty warble with a noticeably mumbling, uncertain beginning and a strong whistling finish – described by a friend Rick as sounding like a 'blackbird on speed'!

It has been discovered that males with a high song rate, between 160 and 180 phrases per hour, are those that possess the best territories, with a high density of vegetation suitable for nesting. They don't have to go far to forage and so can sing more. Males that sing at a lower rate, uttering 80-100 phrases per hour, hail from territories with more open vegetation, where a potential nest is more vulnerable to predators. The males disclose this information honestly by their song rate, allowing the females to choose the best possible mate. But that's not the whole story. Males that sing a lot contribute much less to feeding the young than their less voluble colleagues. A female, therefore, that places her nest in a lower quality territory at least gains the benefit of having more help in providing for her chicks.

Where have you hidden your nest, you cunning thing?

The Blackcap nests on or close to the ground in a tangle of brambles and other dense vegetation. The male builds several rudimentary nests ('cock nests') from which the female chooses one to fashion into a neat, rather delicate cup-shape of woven stalks lined with animal hair.

**Your speedy song is quite a one;
How can I tell you apart from your cousin?**

The Blackcap's song, an attractive stream of sweet, musical phrases, is confusingly similar to that of the Garden Warbler. The Blackcap is said to have more obvious phrases, rich clear notes, varying tempo and generally ends with a flourish. However, the song is quite variable and may include imitations, including that of the Garden Warbler with which this bird is so often confused!

**You clatter like stones
When something freaks you to your bones
What has frightened you so?**

The Blackcap's alarm call, a hard 'tack', sounds like two stones being knocked together. Also has a grating 'churr'.

**You're off in the Autumn for that long journey south
To feed on berries in those hot winter lands;
Can I join you?**

The Blackcap is insectivorous in the breeding season, but in the autumn and winter it takes a considerable number of berries, which tend to form the bulk of its diet.

The Blackcaps of northern Europe are long-distance migrants, flying down to sub-Saharan Africa for the winter; some may travel as much as 6000km to their wintering grounds.

Birds navigate by the sun and the stars, by memory and landmarks, and by the earth's magnetic field. It has been discovered that some birds have tiny grains of a magnetic mineral called magnetite in their heads, which can detect the Earth's magnetic field.

**O, Blackcap
O, Blackcap
How sweet the sound!
Beltane delight.**

1st May 2012



(Thank you to the RSPB for the field information.)

Woodpigeon at Steward

Dear pigeon
Everyday bird
You are phenomenal.

Columba palumbus

Pigeons are phenomenal in at least three ways:

(1) Pigeons are the only bird in Europe that can suck up water instead of raising their heads to let gravity do the work. They can sip from minute water sources such as dew on vegetation.

(2) Pigeons feed their young on milk (only the flamingo and emperor penguin can also). Cells in the crop walls fill with nutrients, thicken and then break off, making a paste-like substance full of protein and minerals. The chicks grow quickly!

(3) Pigeons are renowned for their homing ability with pinpoint navigation over long distances. They orientate by the Sun's position, have an accurate internal clock, and are highly sensitive to magnetic fields. Plus they use landmarks, low frequency sounds and smells to find their way. They are also highly sensitive to atmospheric pressure and thus have a built-in weather forecasting system to help them. But this most famous of travelling birds is not a migrant. Most pigeons live within a very small area and never leave it.

I love your clap and feigning dive.

In the Wood Pigeon display flight, the male rises up at a shallow angle, claps his wings loudly together, stalls as if shot and then glides down with wings and tail spread. This manoeuvre follows a straight line and may be repeated up to five times in succession. The bird lands, lifts his tail up and down slowly, and then usually resumes cooing.

**Your cooing so often fills the woodland air;
You are a regular sight
And a hunter's delight.**

Pigeons are very skittish and will fly off from their perch high in the canopy when they observe a human approaching on the ground, with good reason. Farmers consider them a pest for feeding on their crops and many are shot. Lovers of wild flesh will shoot them down on the wing using a shotgun – the meat is much admired.

**Companion of all seasons
I admire you so
And to honour you I say 'Ho'!**

(Info from the RSPB.)

Moorland Murmuration at Dusk

Okehampton Camp, Dartmoor

26th February 2012

Starlings in their hundreds of thousands come assembling
From as far away as 50km;
It's a bird show to beat the finest seat at the Royal Opera House or
Cirque du Soleil;
Are they showing off?
They must love it – the excitement of being a small part,
a *very small* part, in a vast aerial display – merging in with the collective,
the morphic field.

Like a swarm of bees,
Like a cloud of dust,
Smoke swirling in the wind....
Similes and metaphors can't do it justice.

What heaven to be underneath one of those vast flocks low to the
ground,
Looking up through the black bodies of triangular wings and short,
square tails to the sky above,
Watching the brief flapping, the gliding, the turning,
Absorbing that soft wing sound.

Then they find a place on the branches, on the ground, at
the pre-roost assembly -
What heaped blackness in those bare trees and on short clipped grass!
Chattering, forever restless,
Like children full of sugar;
One moment in this tree
Then, as if caught by the wind, a portion rising into the air to swirl and
descend elsewhere nearby.
Finally, at an invisible signal,
The mass exodus begins across the short patch of Moor
To the conifer roost.

Oh, how those army guys must love their nightly neighbours!
Final displays of aerial magnificence,
The last 'wows' escape the mouths of the human spectators,
Before the birds descend for a noisy night.

Sturnus vulgaris

Swan

Enchanting creature of purity,
You embody grace,
Your slender neck
In coiled poise.

Fierce protector of your boundaries
And faithful lover
You awaken us to our power and beauty.

You are born of whiteness,
Airy,
Stately on your ballroom of glass,
Meditating all day on this mirror,
Gliding with effortless effort;

Then, dipping your eyes into the darkness,
Searching the watery underworld
For sustenance;

Or drifting, at evening, far out
Bringing, through your enchantment,
Stillness and awe.

Mute Swan
Cygnus olor



Robin Redbreast of my heart

Your chest is on fire with your passion;
Your boldness, your anger, your pride -
Always inspiring;
Your presence -
Always understood;

Worm in mouth,
On the ground,
Hopping by my feet,
Brawling, courting,
Or singing merrily from a perch,
You are joy!

Erithacus rubecula

Swift

Apus apus

**Swift, my baby
How do you do it?
Flying high in the sky
Never touching ground -
The most airborne of creatures.**

Swifts are often thought of alongside swallows and martins, but they are actually of a different family of birds.

**The Sky is your element,
Perching an unknown thing,
The nest your only Earth moment.
Your sickle wings, black against the sky, mark the Summer;
Your screaming in playful parties is
A joy to behold.**

Swifts eat, drink, sleep, gather nest material and sometimes mate in flight!

Although breeding swifts sleep in their nests, non-breeding birds are famous for their ability to cap-nap on the wing, and to stay aloft throughout the short summer nights. On the warmest evenings of the year, it's possible to watch them as they first fly over in screaming, circling parties, then rise higher and higher into the air as darkness gradually falls, eventually being lost to sight. They will rise to a height of between one and two thousand metres, and maintain their lift by flying into the wind and alternating flaps and glides. Here they doze and lose some of their alertness, although it seems unlikely that they sink into the depths of sleep. By dawn, they are on their way down again, circling until they once again reach the layer of flying insects.

A young swift has no cause to touch down on something solid from the point that it takes its first flight to the point that it first lands near its first nest site some 20 months later. These birds do not land at all!

A swift's toes only point forwards so it cannot perch. A grounded swift finds it very difficult if not impossible to take off again. If you find one on the ground, pick it up and throw it into the air.

Where is your home – Africa or England?

Swifts arrive in May as one of the last migrants and then leave by the

end of August. So much of a swift's life is spent away from Britain. Some weeks are spent travelling, but most are lived under African skies, from the central to the southern half of that continent. In fact, swifts only come here for our temporary clear, sunny skies and also for our very long summer days. They might breed here, but at heart they are African birds, sojourning here for a short nesting expedition lasting three months or so. As soon as they are finished they will take the next flight home.

**Swift by name and by nature,
You follow the flying insects,
Follow the Sun -
No worms for you!**

Swifts are highly specialised birds, feeding on aerial invertebrates that float around in the atmosphere below a hundred metres or so. Although most of a swift's prey consists of flying insects, it will also hunt for the minute, gossamer-borne spiders that also find their way up there, to be dispersed by the wind. Each diminutive member of the 'aerial plankton' is caught individually, by a flick of the wings and an opening of the swift's huge gape. They are singled out by eye. The swift does not trawl open-mouthed through swarms of insects, sweeping them up as if with a net. It is a far more refined feeder than that, having a preference for food that is between 5 and 8 mm in length. Each bird captures up to 10,000 invertebrates a day when feeding young.

Of course, the weather is not always suitable for this high-precision aerial pursuit. As soon as the wind gets up or the clouds gather, it becomes more difficult for the swift to catch food. For a while it can manage by fielding insects that have just hatched from ponds or rivers, skimming very low in long, rapid sweeps just over the water surface. Or it will concentrate in the sheltered air behind woods or buildings, or in the lee of higher ground. But if bad weather persists, it must take evasive measures.

In fact, swifts can tell if bad weather is approaching, for there may be a perceptible drop in the number of food items wafting around, even when the depression is 500km away. They must also be aware of the falling atmospheric pressure. With this early warning system operating, many birds (especially those not breeding) leave the area temporarily. They embark on a round trip that could take them several hundred kilometres from their breeding or potential breeding colonies. They fly into the wind, in a clockwise direction, skirting the front and taking a short-cut south or south-west to the fairer weather behind. Their remarkable storm-avoiding movements quite regularly take them to the Continent and back, and the whole trip may be as much as 2000km.

Meanwhile, any chicks left behind are able to survive for several days with their large fat reserves. In addition, they may lower their metabolic rate and become torpid, burning up as little fuel as possible.

**I marvel at your skill,
Your speed,
Your grace.**

The swift's remarkable ability to avoid weather fronts is made possible by its celebrated aerodynamic shape. With their streamlined bodies, tiny feet and long, sickle-shaped wings, swifts are expert gliders, moving great distances without many wing-beats, saving energy. Swifts are also extremely fast through the air, and can travel several hundred kilometres a day effortlessly. These attributes have conferred on the swift the most aerial existence by far of any living bird.

**You inspire me to reach higher,
To go further;
But I do not envy you
For my home is the Earth.**

(Thank you to the RSPB for the field information.)

The Dipper

Cinclus cinclus

The Dipper's deep brown head, bold white chest and unwebbed feet
Do not mark it out as a lover of swimming.
Yet this is a bird of fast flowing, oxygenated rivers,
An expert in subaquatic ambulations,
Flapping its wings to power it down,
In search of caddis larvae and nymphs.

Its dense, oily plumage keep it warm and dry;
A flap of skin covers its nose (forget a clothespeg!);
And its eyes can adapt to the different refraction in air & water;
It stores up an abundance of oxygen in haemoglobin rich blood,
And slows its heartbeat when swimming to maintain its supply
For its long dives.

Then perched on damp rocks surfacing within the stream,
It bobs up and down to live up its name.

This plump songbird's walk into fast water
Is an extraordinary sight to behold.
Look out for them on the upland stretches
Of the Dart, the Bovey and the Teign.

Peregrine –

Falco peregrinus

**The fastest bird in the West;
Unbeaten record since time immemorial;
How do you do it?
I demand to know.
Why?
Because the mechanics of life
are always fascinating.
Same applies for all God's creatures.
So let's hear.**

The peregrine is the fastest moving bird – possibly the fastest moving creature of any kind – in the world. When a peregrine has spotted some likely prey, which it might do while perched on a crag or circling at high altitude, its strategy is generally to strike from above. So it manoeuvres itself to a point high above what it hopes is its unsuspecting quarry and then, once in position, simply plunges down towards its prey, with wings almost folded. Allowing gravity to work, the bird soon accelerates to astonishing speeds. If the dive – or 'stoop' as it is usually known – is from about 1000m up, then in theory a peregrine weighing 1kg could accelerate to more than 300kph. So far speeds up to 180kph have been confirmed – this is still incredibly fast.

This makes the peregrine a much feared bird. These remarkable hunters have been known to catch 120 different species of bird in Britain alone – the victims ranging in size from the tiny Goldcrest to the huge Heron. Even fellow raptors are at risk. But the peregrine's staples are usually pigeons, grouse and starlings.

**Ah – I feel I know you better now.
I admire you more.
We are all unique and fascinating,
Each one of us.
So what else is there to know – reveal more.**

One might expect that a peregrine would dive vertically, but this isn't always the case. On longer drops especially, it usually maintains an angle of 30-45° to the vertical. The reason is that the peregrine's overlapping, binocular vision – the zone of vision most effective for judging distance – works best at an angle of 40° to its target. And so, rather than tilting its head, which would increase drag, the peregrine dives at a slant.

The stoop not only gets the peregrine to its target very quickly, but also

creates enormous momentum. This means that peregrines don't usually need to dispatch their prey with a bite to the back of the head, as most falcons do, but simply kill it on impact. Usually all you see is a fast moving peregrine and then a puff of feathers as the talons – balled into fists – strike the bird. The victim's neck is often broken, and occasionally the poor creature is decapitated.

**Dear falcon,
How can you still breathe
At such incredible speeds?**

Check out the falcon's nostrils! In the opening of the nostril is a small cone that protrudes a bit, disrupting the airflow.

The air pressure from the stoop could possibly damage the peregrine's lungs, but small bony tubercles in its nostrils guide the shock waves of the air entering the nostrils (in the same way as intake ramps and inlet cones of jet engines), enabling the bird to breathe more easily while diving, by reducing the change in air pressure.

**Wow!
And you hold another record too?**

The peregrine is arguably the world's most widely naturally distributed land bird, occurring on every continent, in a wide variety of different habitats and in every climatic zone from the Arctic to the tropics. In this respect, the Barn Owl is its main rival.

And what happens at home?

Although peregrines are violent killers, there is little aggression about them in other ways. They are hardly territorial at all, with very few skirmishes reported; the occupancy of a home range appears to be enough to deter intruders. The young peregrines in the nest are also non-competitive, lacking the murderous zeal of some other birds of prey.

Most individuals live in one area, with one mate, throughout their lives. All they require is a hunting and breeding area, the latter consisting usually of a cliff ledge but sometimes of a tall building. Peregrines home ranges are traditional and are passed down the generations. Some are known to have been occupied for 400 years or more.

**I look forward to the day
When I catch sight of your stoop.
Thank you.**

(And thanks once again to
Dominic Couzens and the RSPB.)

Woodpeckers three,

How are thee?

Britain has three species of woodpecker – the Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted or Barred Woodpecker, and the Green Woodpecker. Each has different habits and personalities.

Let's start with the Great Spotted.

Dendrocopus major

**Bold bird, bedecked in black, white and red;
What's all this drumming about?**

From January and throughout spring, the Great Spotted Woodpecker's long, chisel-like beak is hammered very rapidly into a sonorous piece of wood to make a pleasing drumming sound. Both sexes drum, to proclaim territory and to attract a mate, and so the drumming acts as a kind of song. The woodpecker's mighty bill is also used throughout the year for excavating holes to make a nest cavity and for a roosting hideaway.

The woodpecker often chooses to work on wood that is slightly rotten. It will hack away steadily – it's heavy work. After a week or two of intermittent effort, the woodpecker will have made a substantial cavity, and so starts working from the inside. By the end of the excavation, the wood chips are gathered in the bill and tossed dismissively out of the new home.

It takes a very special bill to wreak this kind of destruction upon rotten, or sometimes live, wood. That bill is also used for chipping wood-boring insects into view, or for ripping off bark, whatever it takes to provide a diet of arboreal invertebrates. To aid this, the end of the woodpecker's tongue has barbs on it to pick off the invertebrates.

**All this drumming sounds intense;
What's your shock absorber?**

In most birds, the bones of the beak are joined to the cranium. But in the woodpecker, the cranium and beak are separated by a sponge-like tissue that takes the shock each time the bird strikes its bill against a tree.

And what about your lesser cousin?

Dendrocopus minor

The Lesser Spotted or Barred Woodpecker (named after the barred pattern on its back) is the smallest woodpecker in Europe – about the

size of a sparrow. It has a small bill and can only excavate a dead trunk or branch (unlike the Great Spotted which can hammer into live oak!). Unfortunately, the numbers of this diminutive bird have declined sharply since 1980 – there's now about 1000 pairs in the UK. The causes are manifold but include climate change. In early spring, the Barred Woodpecker feeds on caterpillars on live oak. This woodpecker breeds at a late time compared with the caterpillar peak. The warmer springs might cause breeding to be out of sync with the caterpillar peak resulting in a shortage of food for the chicks.

Now the green, green, laughing green;

Picus viridis

How about you?

Is it true you have an obsession with ants?

The Green Woodpecker is green for a reason. The colour is ideal camouflage for a bird that forages on the ground among swards of grass. In summer, the Green Woodpecker eats almost nothing but ants; only in winter does it make incursions up into the trees to take other types of insects.

Often a Green Woodpecker will make a hole right through the heart of an ant's nest and lap the unfortunate creatures up. This arch ant-eater has a very long tongue that will stick out 10cm beyond its bill, and the tip of that tongue reaches into holes and pathways, disturbing workers in every corner of their city. Moreover, the tongue has a flat, wide tip that is thick with saliva, enabling it to soak up all the ants.

Turf does not present much of a hammering challenge, so a Green Woodpecker's bill is weak compared to other woodpeckers. Thus when spring approaches, rather than drumming, the birds produce a loud laughing call to advertise the territory.

Despite their weaker bills, Green Woodpeckers do excavate their own nest hole, usually in dead wood.

So there we go -

The tour round our three woodpeckers is at an end.

Which is your favourite?



Peacock -

Pavo cristatus

**Your sonorous calls resound down the valley;
Most exotic of birds,
How do you find it in England?**

Our neighbours across the valley have a pair of Indian Peafowl (a Peacock and a Peahen) who sometimes fly over to visit. Their distinctive loud calls can be heard at any time of the day or night, particularly during the spring.

The male (peacock) has iridescent blue-green coloured plumage. The peacock tail upper coverts spread out in a distinctive train that is more than 60% of the bird's total body length and boast colourful "eye" markings of blue, gold, red, and other hues. The large train is used in courtship displays when it is arched into a magnificent fan that reaches across the bird's back and touches the ground on either side. Females are believed to choose their mates according to the size, colour, and quality of these outrageous feather trains. Like a cupped hand behind the ear, the erect tail-fan of the male helps direct sound to the ears. He has a crest atop the head. The female (peahen) has a mixture of dull green, brown, and grey in her plumage. She lacks the long tail coverts of the male but has a crest. The peahen can also display her plumage to ward off female competition or signal danger to her young.

As with many birds, vibrant plumage colours are not primarily pigments, but optical interference reflections, based on regular, periodic nanostructures of the barbules (fibre-like components) of the feathers. Slight changes to the spacing result in different colours. Such interference-based structural colour is important for the peacock's iridescent hues that change and shimmer with viewing angle, since unlike pigments, interference effects depend on light angle.

Peafowls are forest birds that nest on the ground. They are omnivorous and eat plant parts, flower petals, seed heads, insects and other arthropods, reptiles, and amphibians.

**How strange and how lovely it is to have you here;
I'd miss you now if you were to go.**



Daniel LionHeart – Poet, Storyteller, Singer, Outdoor Leader – lives at Steward Community Woodland, an eco-community on the edge of Dartmoor. This collection of poems arises out of his love for the birds he lives with at Steward Wood. These poems will lift your heart and help to connect you with the feathered ones from Peregrine to Chiffchaff and Robin.