

Wader crusader

Simon Lester is moved by a journey that reveals the cultural significance and current plight of our cherished curlew

Nature

Curlew Moon

Mary Colwell
(William Collins, £16.99)

THIS book charts a determined woman's 500-mile walk through the British countryside to highlight the plight of the enigmatic Eurasian curlew. Whether or not you know what a curlew is, by the end of this well-crafted and thoughtful adventure, you'll wonder quite how we have let this iconic bird slip through our fingers to near extinction.

The author's love of Nature, people and religion is woven in and out of various encounters along the pilgrimage, which turns into a crusade to reverse the fortunes of this much-cherished wader.

It's easy to understand how the curlew has got under our skin since the beginning of time, thanks to its haunting calls and role as a harbinger of spring and the new moon; an abundance of natural history, folklore and poetry reflects its importance in our culture. All this is meticulously

researched and the book is charmingly illustrated by Jessica Holm (*right and below*); it's a shame the drawings aren't bigger.

The quest begins in Northern Ireland when, movingly, the author places a lock of her late Irish mother's hair on the surface of Lough Erne in tribute to a woman who 'to her unending credit, even in the darkest days of The Troubles, never tolerated the taking of sides'. It's a quality that her daughter has inherited and one that, hopefully, will enable this perceptive conservationist to help secure the curlew's future.

The amble through Ireland, both south and north, is an enjoyable one, recorded in a lively and easy to read style that almost disguises the fact there are so few curlews. However, the all too sad reflections of the old, who mourn the emblematic wader, and the ignorance of the largely oblivious young, soon come to the fore.

Along the way, the writer learns how changes in farming and forestry, along with the shocking scale of the peat industry (both legal and illegal), have combined to add to the decline of the curlew. Then, of course, there's predation—the hardest nut to crack—and the irritatingly unpalatable subject of predator control.

We move on to Wales and through to the borders, where the birds have seen massive declines for pretty much the same reasons, albeit without peat extraction.

Depressingly, of the 32 nests monitored at Stiperstones in Shropshire by the Curlew Country initiative during the 2015 and 2016 breeding



seasons, not one curlew fledged, the majority lost to predation by foxes, badgers and crows.

Indeed, curlews are not abundant until the author arrives in driven-grouse-shooting territory. Yet this opens a whole new can of worms for the self-confessed left-wing vegetarian, verging on vegan, to deal with, as she seeks to understand the sometimes controversial moorland management of the red grouse. Here, she meets Tom Orde-Powlett, whose family has owned Bolton Castle estate—with a successful grouse moor and lots of curlews and other waders—for 600 years. They have differing political views, perhaps, but share a passion for curlews and a pragmatic approach to finding a sustainable future for them, as well as for grouse shooting and the hen harrier.

Descending to the coast with the end in sight, the curlew follows the downhill trend, too, and it is time for reflections. This book clearly illustrates that we're especially good at monitoring the decline of the species and laments the years of inertia that have been wasted by not intervening to help the curlew, even though countless scientific studies have shown what needs to be done. Thank goodness for Mary Colwell's commitment, energy and drive to 'stop mithering and get on with it,' for she has inspired and embarrassed people into action. As she concludes of the haunting call of the curlew, 'it would be a tragedy if, on our watch, we let that cry fade away from the song of the Earth'.

Sport

Wisden Cricketers' Almanack 2018

Edited by Lawrence Booth
(Wisden, £55)

THE RISE in prominence of the women's game and Twenty20 cricket is reflected in this year's Wisden. With last summer's women's world cup in England, three of the five Wisden Cricketers of the Year—an award that 'reflects excellence in, or importance on, the previous English summer'—are Englishwomen: Anya Shrubsole, Heather Knight and Natalie Sciver. This accolade, which a player can win only once (although Plum Warner and Jack Hobbs have done so twice), has only gone to a woman twice before: Charlotte Edwards in 2014 and Claire Taylor in 2009. This year's other recipients are Shai Hope and Jamie Porter.

The Leading Cricketer of the Year, reflecting worldwide performances, now has an award for the women's game. Both the winners are Indians: Virat Kohli and Mithali Raj.

Wisden has moved away from being a comprehensive work of yearly record—sadly, long gone are the days when it had full scorecards of every county game from the previous season—to one of comment and awards. The latest annual award to be instituted is The Leading Twenty20 Cricketer in the World, given to Rashid Khan of Afghanistan.

Wisden is rarely given to optimism and the editor strikes cautious notes on English cricket's future. He bemoans this winter's Ashes as 'a stinker: one-sided, often boorish and dulled by pitches stripped of their old character' and finds little joy in England's improvement in 50-over cricket—'the black sheep of the white-ball family'—fearing that England is 'mastering a tongue threatened by extinction'.

Roderick Easdale



Dreamstime; Jessica Holm

