
MY WILD BIRD FRIENDS



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**The truth,
which we have yet to learn,
is that we are no better,
and have no more right to life,
than the four-legged creatures
and the birds and fishes,
or the trees and flowers
and grasses**

Contents

A few preliminary thoughts, a little analysis 4

Strange encounters, fine friendships 10

Aerial acrobatics and an extraordinary meeting 18

An event so extraordinary as to seem miraculous..... 24

Give a bird a bad name..... 30

Callers, regular and irregular 36

A few preliminary thoughts, a little analysis

The quality of life is in question as never before. Intuitively, or by direct experience, we are aware that all is not well, that life does not hold as much for us as it should. Despite modern technology, or because of it, we are becoming more and more enslaved, less free. There are numerous signs of a vast and growing discontent. We see it in the hippies, the drop-outs, in youthful vandalism, in the abandonment of drug addiction. We find it in the upsurge of armed violence, in the widespread despoliation of streets and pavements, and in the countryside. It is exemplified in the absorption with pornography and the present attitude towards sex.

Largely, the population explosion is to blame, but there are other contributory factors. From too little communication, we suddenly find ourselves with too much. Quietude is no longer sought as a boon, and yet it remains as ever a fount for renewal and inspiration. There is a growing invasion of privacy and a plethora of petty lawmaking. Overall, there is a deplorable dearth of individuality. With our wealth of little differences, we are not **meant** to conform, but we are **made** to conform.

Where, then, can we turn for relief from the snares and delusions of life?

Let my story speak for itself. It cannot provide all the answers, but it will point a way. For I am convinced that we must come to see ourselves and the whole of creation as one. Failing this, we shall go on contributing to our own downfall. It is as though, little by little, we are lopping off our own limbs. Each time we kill needlessly, we are killing something of ourselves. We pay immensely for our follies, for our lack of sympathy and understanding.

The truth, which we have yet to learn, is that we are no better, and have no more right to life, than the four-legged creatures and the birds and fishes, or the trees and flowers and grasses. As a form of life, we are more powerful, that is all. To our discredit, we do not use our power aright, and there is a growing awareness that our doom is assured unless we change our ways. And time is running out for us.

As human beings, having dominion over all creatures, we fail to realise our fullest potential while reserving for ourselves any form of exclusiveness. Our human aspirations, our claims to love and affection, go only so far as we permit them to go.

So where do we stand, singly and collectively? Before going on to elaborate and give the reasons for my own attitude towards non-human life, to the birds in particular, there are a few points of primary concern that I should like to place in their right perspective.

Firstly, there is the essential time factor, most important to us because of the strong emphasis we place upon time in our lives of ceaseless hustle and bustle.

"Time is money", it is said. Or, "We cannot find time for the birds or anything of **that** sort". Yet hours are frittered away daily in pursuit of worthless aims. And so, it is said, with some justification, that time is the destroyer of the people.

Yet time has an elastic quality, as I know for myself. In the years of which I shall be speaking, I held a responsible job in industry. In addition, I helped with the housework and gardening, and contrived to keep two cars serviced and on the road. Meanwhile I baked breadloaves, cakes, scones, biscuits, and delighted in making jams and marmalades - a 'glamour cook', so my wife called me. Then there was a long-legged dog pestering me for walks at all hours of the day, every day. Also, I kept my hand in with writing, in preparation for later years, when it would become a full-time occupation, preserving me from retirement.

So, every hour, every minute, was filled with activity, from rising at early morning until going to bed. But not so filled that there was no time left over for my wild bird friends, who gave so much in return.

Despite the enormous pressures to which we are subjected, ever increasingly, we can find time for anything if we really wish to do so, if the desire is there and the will is strong enough.

There are others who say bluntly that they do not have the time to **waste** on birds or anything else of the kind. For myself, I do not count the time a waste. Whatever I give of my precious, monied time, comes back to me with something akin to compound interest.

This I can say in all truth: my life as a whole has benefited immensely from my deep and active interest in nature; for there is not a single thing in life that is so important that it can stand alone, or so all-absorbing that it cannot do with the enrichment of contrast.

As for the birds, they have no conception of clock time, but they have a wonderful sense of basic time and know, in all seasons, when I am due to put in an appearance. I have to be gone from the house at early morning, and they know this. I return when the day is spent, and they know this also. They have a sun-told, heat-told awareness, which we lack.

Apart from the time factor, there will be all sorts of discouragements and disparaging remarks aimed against those who would align themselves with nature. It is a distressing thing about the common populace that there are so many who take exception to what other people do, especially if there is seen to be any unspecified gain accruing.

For myself, I do not mind what aspersions are cast, as long as I am left free to go my own way, irrespective of the opinions of others. However, I should not like the young, or any who are easily influenced, to be dissuaded by the derisiveness and intentional hurt of others. If you do not follow the common line, you are said to be 'queer'. In an earlier era, the term 'cissy' would have been used.

Do not be misled. For the sake of impressionable youngsters, I will state my own case clearly, not from any sense of self-aggrandisement, but so that my motives shall not be misinterpreted. Otherwise, there may be some who are lost in a maze of bewilderment, not knowing who to believe. Also, if I do not make this point abundantly clear, then the birds may lose the support of those who, as a result of outside influence, believe that close intimacy with creatures of the wilds is non-U, and definitely OUT at a time in history when the accent is upon organised games in the rough and tumble of the playing fields.

Therefore, with modesty, and not with the least trace of bombast, I can state that I have taken part, and still take part, in real adventure out of doors. At one stage in my life, I climbed all eight of the Virunga mountains of the Congo, going alone and without transport, and lacking knowledge of the native languages. Resulting from the success of this outlandish venture, I set out for Everest while it was yet a virgin peak and managed to reach the mountain and climb a fair way up it after a long and arduous journey on foot through Sikkim and a remote part of the forbidden

land of Tibet. Later I became well known in South Africa for my exploratory treks along the extremely rugged Tzitzikama Coast, between Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. I have taken part, too, in the hurly-burly of South African politics, in the dangerous years following the Sharpsville Masacre¹. These are my credentials, as it were.

Especially for the young, let me say; Do not be influenced away from your innermost promptings. If you feel inclined toward nature, then go out and fulfil the urge to live with nature; if you consider it more ennobling to save life rather than to kill unnecessarily, then go and do, accordingly; if you feel like keeping company with birds and animals as well as humans, then cultivate such friendships without fear or favour.

The important thing is for us to be ourselves, unaffected by the whims and fancies, the taunts, and jibes of others. For we cannot be other than what we are without causing distress to ourselves. Only that which is solidly based in truth, set upon bedrock, has lasting quality. So, we who feel disposed to go along with nature should not heed others when they deride us and seek to turn us from our true inclinations.

Of course, it may be said against nature lovers that we are anti-social. Here again we need to be sure of ourselves and clear as to our intentions. One does not have to turn away from people in order to turn towards nature. In fact, I am distrustful of those who do so. People may hurt us, they may cause us distress in many ways, but we should hold a balance in all things. Indeed, it is possible and desirable, in a well-ordered life, to live with people and at the same time-cultivate friendship with the birds and animals around us.

Nevertheless, it is a fact; and not a descent into cynicism, to say that lasting human friendships are rare indeed. They are rare because of the common propensity towards self-interest, and the leaning toward criticism, which are specifically human failings. On account of them, few are the friendships that

¹ The Sharpeville massacre occurred on 21 March 1960 at the police station in the township of Sharpeville in the then Transvaal Province of the then Union of South Africa.

survive. What do we want to friend who are critical of us, who will not accept us as we are?

This makes it all the easier to accept the fact that friendship with wild birds, especially those that are migratory or seasonal in their habits, may last only from one breeding season until the next. It is enough to know that in this brief span of life there can be an uncritical acceptance of one another and never an unkind word or a cruel hint - only a measure of give and take, if not of sheer unadulterated joy which can be retained through the years, helpfully, providing only that the essential sincerity of purpose is there to serve as a binding agent.

Before going any further, I wish to make it clear that the object of my many wild bird friendships has not been for the purpose of impressing others, but to satisfy a purely personal urge. My so-called Bird Diary has been turned to use in these talks, but this was not the original intention. Like most diaries, it set out to be a personal and private recording of events too good to be left to the vagaries of an unsound memory.

When endeavouring to transcribe events into words, it is impossible to convey the absolute depth of feeling stirred by the original experiences. For this reason, there can be no entire sharing of emotional experiences, no substitute for direct participation.

Nevertheless, you can, if you will, enter into the spirit of things with me. The actual experiences were mine, but now there is the desire to share them, as far as sharing is possible. I count them too sublime to be kept hoarded away in miserly fashion.

At this point, I wish to make it clear that I do not approve entirely of the term 'bird watching'. I will use it this once, and not again. It smacks too much of something done by halves. If we are to know the wild creatures intimately, then we need to do something more than watch them with desultory, half-hearted interest. We have to give something of ourselves if we are to get anything in return, and this we cannot do easily or flippantly. Our approach must be without reserve. It is not a case of expecting-something in return, but of working towards a healthy reciprocity. '

Ours must be the first move, because we have so alienated ourselves that fear stands between us and the wild creatures. We have to restore tolerance, gain

understanding, which then rebounds to our benefit, comes back to us as ample reward.

For real intimacy we need to come to terms with them and live at their level. Not at a **lower** level than our own, but at **their** particular level. The 'lower animals' - this is another term which I refuse to use.

Birds are necessarily shy and timid, the small ones because of their physical frailty, the large ones because they present tempting targets to man, the incorrigible hunter. It should prompt our shame that in nearly every instance it is man who is the principal enemy, and not the species whose allotted role it is to prey upon others.

No matter what some hunters may claim to the contrary, true kinship is not gained by extending one hand in friendship while holding in the other a gun. These are our only real weapons of strength – tolerance, sympathy, understanding. Although friendship with the wild creatures is something intangible and rare, it can be a splendid and intensely stimulating experience, as I shall set out to prove in subsequent talks.

Strange encounters, fine friendships

My first sustained friendship involving birds in their truly wild state was with two Cape Dikkops, the local variety of a Plover-like bird that is widely distributed in Africa from the Sudan southward. This was near Redhouse, a small village in the Eastern Province of South Africa, where the birds, a mating pair, had taken up seasonal residence in a fallow field bounded by virgin bush. I chanced upon them while taking one of my regular evening walks with my dog.

It was a rather frightening experience. without warning, I was challenged for having strayed unwittingly onto their preserve. With menacing four-note cries uttered on a rising scale, the male bird advanced with wings fully outstretched - all done to intimidate. And very intimidating it can be when the attacks are pressed to very close quarters, as on this occasion.

However, it was not my first experience of this kind, so I stood my ground, refusing to be stampeded. Instead, I imitated their calls, which I did by positioning my tongue so as to expel air between my upper teeth sharply. This was something new to the two Dikkops, and their astonishment was plain to see.

Slowly, slowly, the insistent cries of the birds diminished, died down until they were no more than slight clucks of incredulity. What sort of creature was this who talked back at them in their own language – or in what I imagined might be taken for Dikkop talk?

Seizing the initiative, I advanced with both arms raised sideways, my hands drooped slightly, mimicking the spread of their wings. This was confrontation, without a shadow of doubt, and the consternation grew. Then, having gained ascendancy in this war of nerves, I squatted on the ground and the two birds followed suit, shuffling themselves deeper and deeper into the furrows. With the release of tension, their anxious cries of alarm gave way to throaty clucks which quietened still further until they were scarcely audible. The first overtures of friendship had been made.

The same procedure was followed on the next evening and the next, and the next, on and on until it became a firmly established ritual, always with the male bird coming forward to challenge, and with me answering back in its own language and mimicking its show of bravado. I do not know who enjoyed the play most. Let us say that it was a shared experience, bringing mutual delight.

Always the two Dikkops were in the same field and at more or less the same spot as the mutually agreed time. They came to know me from my regularity and constancy of behaviour, and after a few weeks of growing acquaintance they accepted me without any real alarm, though invariably the male bird put on its pretence at intimidation as an opening gambit. Obviously, this was becoming more and more of a pretence, as was shown by the fact I could now approach them more closely than in the first instance.

Within minutes, on each occasion, it was possible for me to “Talk things over”, as I put it to them, and after standing briefly I squatted while the male bird nestled a few short strides away. Always the female bird, playing a subordinate role, positioned herself behind her mate and a little to his right. Invariably there is this accepted code in the world of the wild creatures, and to say that it reflects male dominance is an overstatement and somewhat of a distortion.

With the three of us settled in this formation, I started to “Talk... and talk...and talk”, using these very words slowly and repetitively, “Talk... and talk, and talk to little birds”. But always as a preliminary, to quieten them and gain their confidence, I used the Dikkop’s own language of clucks. I was able to imitate their four-note cries fairly accurately, and so the conversation ran back and forth, shrilly at first and gradually fading to a whisper as the remotest fear vanished and mock bravado became unnecessary.

This is another aspect of nature that is worth commenting upon. These birds always made their calls four times, and so often there is this recurrence of four in nature. Other bird friends of mine, whose stories I shall be recounting, did precisely the same. Once I had an encounter with a baby baboon in the wilds, and it also gave its peculiar little cry four times, never more, never less. And come to think of it, there are four seasons in a year, spring, summer, autumn, winter; and there are four cardinal points, north, south, east, west; there are four natural divisions of time into days, weeks, months, years, while the weeks themselves are gained by dividing each month into four parts. And there were tribes of North American Indians, living close to nature, who treated four as a sacred number.

There must be some underlying reason why animals and birds, in particular, but also some humans, should adopt four as a common factor. It presents a fascinating line of thought, and as a subject it is worthy of a close and thorough investigation.

While I talked to the birds, using simple human speech, they gave throaty little chuckling responses. I loved this part of the play best of all. After a day's hard work, all too often with the peculiar problems of industry besetting me – not so much the work itself, but the savage cut-and-thrust of ruthless, position-seeking co-workers – these extraordinary little interludes in the quiet of the evening, with dusk gathering, reached right into me.

This is what I mean by the quality of life. Such profound peace, in a restless age of turmoil, is beyond price. There is nothing to surpass it.

I went so far as to confide in these two birds, revealing my innermost problems to them. They were my father confessors, and my secrets were secure with them.

Often our nightly sessions lasted twenty minutes, or as much as half an hour. During all this time my dog remained unobtrusively in the background, searching for moving things in the bush, digging holes, rattling, or just standing watching, but never intruding to break up the unusual conversation piece between man and birds. My wife had named her Batsy, on account of her large bat-like ears, which flopped in most unruly manner as she walked or, more often, ran – for she was a creature of considerable activity. A dog of mixed parentage and of no pedigree at all, she had come to us starved and neglected. She developed into a wonderful animal, and rewarded us a thousandfold.

It is beyond me to say how Batsy came to be so co-operative, for I did not train her to non-interference. In fact, she was completely undisciplined. One word of command from me, and off she would go on her own. Yet, voluntarily, she came to accept my friendship with the birds quite casually and easily, as though it were the sort of behaviour, she expected of me.

In all respects she was a good bird dog, at home, in the open country and in the bushveld. But **not** the seashore! There she never failed to chase the seagulls, the terns, the cormorants, the black oystercatchers and even the tiny, inoffensive sandpipers; against all these she had a personal vendetta.

Sometimes the female Dikkop nestled right down into a furrow, until she was out of sight as I squatted nearby. She could see me only by craning her neck upward, and this she did from time to time, curiosity getting the better of her. Whenever she caught sight of me doing likewise, then down went her head once more. After a while I would half rise to catch her in the act of popping up again. Down she

would duck. Then, slowly, periscope-like, her head would rise, only to retract quickly when catching sight of me. This Jack-in-the-Box game kept both of us amused for long, and it played a regular part in our nightly affairs. Strangely, the male bird took no part in this game.

If anyone had chanced upon the scene, with me squatting there in the half light, at the gathering of dusk, playing games and talking earnestly to two Cape Dikkops, they would have had cause for wonderment. But never mind. It was our way of breaking down barriers, of gaining richness, and it worked. I treasured every minute of it.

Our friendship developed, and I knew without a shadow of doubt that I was not the only one who looked forward to these regular get-togethers. Otherwise, why should these two birds, occasionally taken by surprise when I arrived later than usual, come running from afar when I called to them? Missing me at the usual time, they went foraging. Here and there, but I had only to call, and they would arrive in haste.

On one memorable occasion the male bird was so intent upon covering the intervening distance over the rough terrain that he stumbled and almost fell face forward.

Now Dikkops are mainly ground birds, heavy in build and slow to take to the wing, and to see one stumble in this manner was quite out of the ordinary. It was slapstick comedy at its best. Straight face? Did I keep a straight face? Well, friend though I was, I found it hard to keep from laughing outright.

Pulling itself to a halt, with what dignity it could muster, the bird then demonstrated a distinctly human trait. It acted self-consciously, as we would have done. It looked down at its feet, at first one and then the other, as though they were to blame. It was such an ordinarily human gesture that it left me with a lasting awareness of the close affinity of one and all, whether bird, animal or human.

I might add that this inspection of the feet, usually in a show of embarrassment, is not uncommon amongst two-legged creatures. But never with human beings also. Size and weight do not necessarily signify aggressiveness. Some of the biggest of men are the gentlest of all.

Boubou Shrikes have no bad habits of which I am aware, though some people think otherwise. Unfortunately, there are those who are ever ready to give a dog a bad name or attach to any bird an evil reputation. They go in search of the bad, and they find it. Hence it is said that our world is as it is in our comprehension.

In more northern parts of Africa the male and female are inclined to be indistinguishable at a glance, but in the south, there is a marked difference between the sexes, the male being distinctly white and black, while the female is tinged with rufous on the underparts and spreading up to the breast. Consequently, we named our boubous White Boubou and Brown Boubou, these being the male and female respectively.

Before going on to relate the story, I should like to ask you to do all you can to enter into the spirit of things with me. To this end, let go of all reserve, switch off all resistance to new ideas, lose the preconceived notions which only serve as a hindrance. Without a truly sympathetic approach there can be no appreciation of the depth of feeling that stirred within me.

The incident may seem trifling in relation to such momentous events as the first ascent of Everest, or Chichester's rounding of Cape Horn, or Armstrong's first footfall upon the surface of the Moon. But to me it brought immense and lasting pleasure. As always, it is not the size of an event, but its significance to us, which determines its merit.

To others the incident may serve as an example of what might be gained from genuine friendship with wild birds. Friendship, that is, in place of the traditional enmity, or worse still, complete disregard.

While it is common for caged birds to recognise and greet their owners, it is something different and quite out of the ordinary for wild birds in complete freedom to recognise and greet a man of their acquaintance far away from his home. Yet this happened to me one day, to provide an unforgettable experience.

About noon, one Sunday in May, I was on a photographic foray in the bush between our Redhouse home and the Swartkops River. For several days I had awaited suitably sunny and still conditions in which to take a colour photo of *Loranthus elegans*, popularly known as Matches. They were at their magnificent best, but with work predominating in my affairs there seemed little chance of

finding the required conditions unless the sun and wind should co-operate on the Saturday or Sunday of this particular weekend.

The Saturday had proved quite unsuitable, with the sun obscured throughout by heavily overcast skies. The *Loranthus* was out in all its glory, and could not wait. There was more wind than I had wished for, but the sun shone intermittently.

So, there I was, camera in hand, the lens directed at a most spectacular display of *Loranthus* in just the right stages of development, some of the flowers with the 'match' heads showing deep purple, some with the petals fully open, the sun backlighting them within a framework of *Rhus glauca*, the host plant – for *Loranthus* is a parasite, but very lovely for all that. The wind was creating too much motion amongst the foliage for the low shutter speed which I had selected, so I had to wait for it to drop. Also, it made my eyes water copiously, and this made accurate focussing difficult.

I had to re-focus a number of times, then all was ready. At this stage, while braced to press the shutter release, I heard an unmistakable sound coming from my left at about shoulder height. It was a quick, throaty "Chuck-chuck-chuck-chuck". I recognised it at once. It was repeated, "Chuck-chuck-chuck-chuck", and I did not need to look in order to be certain.

It was a friendly greeting of the two Boubou Shrikes who called twice daily for cheese, which they took from a small plastic dish on our veranda table. These shrikes have four regular calls, and this is one of them.

From a corner of my eye, I saw two forms hopping from branch to branch of a nearby tree. I did not look up. Instead, containing my growing excitement, I concentrated harder than ever upon the scene ahead. Photography is a precise business, and at its best it is a definite art.

When I felt sure that all was well, and before my heartbeats could mount sufficiently to cause camera shake, I pressed the shutter release on what was to result in one of my best wildflower photographs – a most pleasing result, twice blessed.

Before turning round, I called out "Bou-bou, Bou-bou", which is the particular call from which these birds get their name. Only then did I turn to verify that it was indeed my own two birds who had found me in the deep bush so far from home.

Yes, there were, unmistakably – White Boubou and Brown Boubou, male and female, together as always. I have yet to know of a more devoted couple.

The wondrousness of the occasion made immediate impact. There I was, photographing in the thick bush, out of sight of home, and these two friendly though wild birds had spotted me and come on swift wings to be with me. Not only this, but they had greeted me in familiar manner, acting upon their own initiative.

My joy knew no bounds. I felt aglow with tingling excitement. Nor was I the only one to feel so elated. Excitement is not merely a human characteristic. It is shared by wild birds. This was made obvious by the reactions of the two Boubous. They clucked and chatted while flitting from bough to bough, up and down and round about, their feet barely touching down before they were off again, ballet-dancing with quicksilver mobility.

I spoke to them eagerly, using their names, my joy spilling over and touching them. There was no need for restraint, and none was used.

In our relations with other humans, there is always something held back. We dare not let go of all restraint. How glorious it is to abandon all human reserve upon occasion.

Boubou Shrikes are secretive birds as a rule, and few people have the privilege of observing them closely. But there were the two Boubous only a few feet away from me and in plain view. I was privileged indeed.

At home these two birds often gave the same throaty "Chuck-chuck", but now they gave it in a long series, on and on, in obvious joyous greeting.

There, on the spot, without having to await later reflection, I was aware of my good fortune in being greeted thus by two completely free birds of the wilds. In my excitement I came near to forgetting the almost automatic procedure of turning the spool of my camera in readiness for the next exposure.

I wished for no greater familiarity, and knew that these wild birds would not permit it. So, I stood still awhile, and presently they quick-stepped into deep foliage and then flew away strongly. Their direction of travel was the same as mine as I turned and headed for home.

I had a good idea of what to expect, and in this I was not disappointed. Arriving home, I opened the front door and grabbed the conveniently placed cheese dish, placed it on the outdoor table, and sat down to wait.

As anticipated, I did not have long to wait. Nor did I need to call.

They came almost at once from the poinsettia where they had been on the lookout for me. Like two children early home from school, they were unable to contain their excitement. Standing fully erect, they craned their necks from side to side, as is their habit when wishing to express some delight. Meanwhile they clucked softly and joyously.

They did not take many pieces of cheese, for they were not hungry. As we can be at times, they were too excited to be able to eat much.

There is no sad ending to this story, nor to our friendship as a whole. The two Boubous brought up a family, introduced their two fine, healthy offspring to us, fed them for a while at our table, and then departed. They belonged to the wilds, and they returned to the wilds. They were free, and freely I saw them go.

Aerial acrobatics and an extraordinary meeting

In my previous talk I told how I made friends with two Steppe Buzzards, not captive birds but wholly free, wild creatures. They had come from thousands of miles away, having flown *Down the Long Wind*, to borrow an apt phrase from Tennyson.

I had only to appear at the Swartkops River, nearly a mile from home, for them to spot me and fly to a convenient look-out post, from where they watched in obvious wonderment as I exercised after swimming, my long legs and arms flailing the air in wild abandonment.

My exercises were done to numbers, as seems to be the accepted practice everywhere, for all forms of exercising. But how to count and at the same time talk in Buzzard language to the two watchers, to hold their interest and keep them from flying away? Eventually I devised a method of my own, and many were the times when I huffed and puffed and counted, a typical count going something like this; “One, two, three, eee-ong, eee-ong, four, five six, eee-ong, eee-ong ...”

I had the feeling that I owed it to the birds to include them in my count; secretly I wished to do all in my power to hold their watching brief and sustain our close friendship.

Recently I came across a description of Buzzards, in general, as ‘impressive flyers’. Lacking a superlative, this ranks as an understatement. I recall an occasion when I saw my two Steppe Buzzards demonstrating their extraordinary prowess in a display of effortless flight which left me with a lasting impression, one of my most treasured memories.

Beyond the river, towering cumulonimbus clouds had built into great thunderheads, with characteristic anvil spreading out, preparatory to a storm. I watched with mounting admiration as the Buzzards, in close-knit formation, flew into the base of the swirling cloud-mass, which resembled nothing less than the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. Up the two birds soared into the swirls of snowy-white, orange, red and grey, up and up in tight circles, climbing in neat spirals with never a wing-beat. Then, still without a single wing-beat, they glided out and back, out and back, their flight-paths conforming with the configuration of the billowing clouds.

I looked down briefly, and there was my dog Batsy, standing quietly at heel, a thing she seldom did. Was she also entranced by the scene? Or was she just standing?

An even greater spectacle was to follow. The two performers, having gained considerable altitude, set off westward on a long, soaring flight, free of effort. Away they went, until I thought I had seen the last of them. But no. As pinpoints in the sky, they circled and came back, to re-enter the cloud formation. They dived at speed and rose again. Their spectacular glide had taken them far, and now they were back where they had started. Why had they set out, if not for the sheer joy of effortless flight?

Except for the occasional rumble of thunder in the near distance, there was utter silence. I have thrilled to the sight and sound of racing cars and motor cycles at high speed, but this was something different, more compelling, altogether more inspiring. There was the speed and spectacle, but no associated noise.

I remained until monster spots of rain came pelting down, whereupon man and dog raced for home; at the same time, the two birds came out from the clouds and glided down to their night's resting place on the far side of the Swartkops River.

The time for them to leave was approaching. From daily observations, I noticed how their behaviour changed perceptibly before they were due to depart for their breeding grounds far, far to the north. Instead of using low perches from which to scour the ground for living sustenance, they took to high, soaring flights, though not on the same spectacular scale as on the occasion of the advancing thunderstorm.

Fortunately, for my peace of mind, I tumbled to the conclusion that they were accustoming themselves to altitudes such as used when migrating. Also their attitude towards me underwent a distinct change. As well as more distant in space, they became more distant in the personal sense. Necessarily, they were breaking all earthly bonds. Theirs was a great and purposeful mission, leaving no room for sentiment.

Our relationship was to be severed. I perceived this. But they would return, for the same two birds of prey came annually, finding their way unerringly, logging thousands of miles out and back. They had their own inbuilt compasses, their

radar systems, their computers, guiding them across seas and lakes, across the skies, between the southern tip of Africa and the Steppes of Asia.

How do they do it? We do not know, perhaps because we look for something extraordinarily complex, whereas their system is simplicity itself.

I have not declared this openly before, but it is my belief that migrating birds, wholly relaxed and trustful (and indeed all wild creatures) have a direct link with the Creator of all things, except in flashes when fear intrudes. I think they come and go, guided by God, to use one of our own terms.

They are closer to the great, undefinable life force than we are. Our worldly knowledge limits us. It does not matter what complicated laboratory tests are made with what elaborate equipment, or what field tests are made with however many helicopters, our scientists will not succeed in unravelling the overall mystery of bird migration **that** way.

To my delight, and not altogether surprisingly, our friendship was renewed in the following year. Down by the river, as I exercised after swimming, the Steppe Buzzards glided over and we took up where we had left off ... "eight, nine, eee-ong ... eee-ong, eee-ong" went my count, as the long-distance fliers kept watch from the same vantage point nearby. There was no doubt as to their identity. They were the same birds, or they would not have reacted in the same way, so easily, so readily, without need for any introduction. Oh yes, they were the same two birds, unringed, but as identifiable as if they had been subjected to the ignominious procedure of ringing.

For the second successive year, our nightly rendezvous was kept. Then after I had thought that they must have migrated together, I learnt otherwise. I was told by a man living in the same village how he had come to find one of the birds lying dead beneath the span of electric wires on which it had perched so often before without harm. Apparently, its wings had spanned the power lines and it had been electrocuted. I was upset, the more so because my friend the Buzzard had fallen victim of our times, of our vast and sprawling civilization, of our enormous and growing complexity.

Often I think sadly of the long, lonely journey northward of the surviving bird. Even today, from another continent, I do not fail to send out thoughts to the bereaved Steppe Buzzard, wishing it well wherever it may be, and hoping that its migratory

flight was not in vain. Hoping, too, that time has healed the great wounds of loneliness.

No buzzards came after that. The smaller sparrowhawks took over, and a solitary goshawk hunted the area occasionally. I felt the loss of the buzzards, as much as one could feel the loss of any long-established friendship. But mingled with the sadness was an overriding gratitude. Memory serves us best when there is an association of pain or sorrow. Strangely, joy has no such lasting quality.

One morning in late March, I was intrigued to see the lone newcomer, the goshawk, heading west with a mob of at least thirty small birds harassing it. Amongst those which I identified were wagtails, larks, warblers and at least one variety of wader. The bird of prey, so noble as a rule, was in ignominious flight, skimming low over the waters of a dam with the small birds buzzing and zooming from all quarters except below, where the wily goshawk left no room for penetration. They came in from above, from behind, from left and right, diving in and granting no respite. Some of the attackers were the smallest of all birds, scarcely any bigger than a man's thumb, only a fraction of the size of the killer bird which they were treating with such disdain.

The fury of the chase made it impossible for me to identify all the species involved, or to make an exact tally of their number. What was beyond doubt was that all these small birds of the bush and of the marshlands had banded together in a show of unity that was good to watch. A super power had threatened, had encroached upon their breeding grounds, and they had shown courage and resourcefulness of a rare kind in seeking to repel the invader.

I have seen two plovers, with young to protect in their nest, dive-bomb a goshawk in the same locality. They too showed courage. But they were not at the same weight disadvantage as the tiny larks and warblers of this attacking party.

As though in recompense for the loss of my Steppe Buzzards, new friendships were established. One of the most richly rewarding was with two Boubou Shrikes, a larger and considerably heavier bird than the Fiscal Shrike, which I shall be introducing later. Although so much larger, they are shy, gentle, placid creatures. One might say of them that they show humility, and there is no greater quality than this. Though big enough to be bullies, they are not that way inclined. But so it is have I seen it emphasised to such an extent as on this occasion.

What a fine film sequence it would have made. But I did not attempt to photograph them on this or any other occasion. To have pointed a camera at them would have been to betray a trust. These things are of the heart and mind and are not meant for celluloid.

Our meetings started in December and carried on without a break through January, February and March. I knew that they must go, sooner or later, and tried to steel myself, knowing beforehand that I should not grieve. For grief is centred in the self, and does not become us as superior human beings.

By now my appetite had been whetted for more experiences of a similar kind, and it so happened that, as the Cape Dikkops left, so a couple of Steppe Buzzards arrived. They came seasonally from afar, from Eastern Europe or Western Siberia, to spend each summer in South Africa, though they do not breed there. Generally birds prefer to breed in the colder climes, perhaps out of deference for their offspring, who precede them or follow them on their flights to warmer regions. Otherwise their young would be faced with winter conditions and unfavourable feeding prospects at the start.

Before I was aware of their presence, the two Buzzards were keeping watch on me. Their curiosity had been aroused when they saw me exercising on the south bank of the Swartkops River after one of my daily swims. This is an all the year round fetish with me, come biting wind or lashing rain. And after swimming I dry myself by flapping in the breeze.

Now curiosity is not a singularly human trait; it is shared by all creatures, and anything that stimulates it in animal or bird constitutes as sure a way as any of making the initial acquaintance that can lead to long-lasting friendship. So, while I swam and exercised, the Buzzards watched and were roused to curiosity.

They had taken up residence in a small wooded kloof on the far side of the river, and I saw them for the first time as they approached, flying from one isolated tree top to another, then gliding across the broad river, which is tidal at this point. They settled nearby, on a tree stripped bare by a lightning flash. It was leafless and had only a few branches, so that it provided a convenient lookout post. It was one of their favourite perches, another being a wooden pole supporting a cross-arm carrying two bare electric power lines.

On a number of occasions, I noticed the two big birds sitting together on top of the single cross-arm, flushing rodents from the scrub bush round about. With their eerie cries emitted systematically one after another, male and female cries of differing tone alternating, it was not difficult to imagine for myself the frightening effect upon the rats and mice, and occasional lizard, lurking below.

I started to imitate their hunting cry, a rather harsh “Eee-ong, eee-ong ... Eee-ong, eee-ong”. Within a few days I was able to approach surprisingly close to their look-out posts without them taking to the wing. They were magnificent creatures, like all birds of prey.

I am particularly fond of buzzards, hawks and eagles, and indeed all the birds of prey. They are so majestic, so purposeful, so utterly devoid of deception. They are killers, and they look the part. Unlike so many human beings, they are without pretence, without sham, completely lacking in humbug and hypocrisy. Their curved beaks and hooked talons mark them for what they are. There is no dagger-behind-the-back menace, no veiled threat, no deceptiveness. It is a strange, hard world we live in: it is the same for all, whether human or not, and the birds of prey symbolise some of the finer attributes to which we, in our better moments, aspire – honesty of purpose, fearlessness, the courage to live up to one's convictions.

Yet, surprisingly, I have seen some of the smallest birds of the bush, including the tiniest of larks and warblers, keeping close company with the two Buzzards on the same span of electric cables.

An event so extraordinary as to seem miraculous

A recent experience with Glossy Starlings leaves me wondering. Perhaps you may be able to solve the mystery for me.

For more than six months two Glossy Starlings had been coming to the cheese dish with clockwork regularity, appearing at breakfast time and again in the late afternoon when I arrived home from work. It was as though they knew my habits intimately and with surety.

These starlings are beautiful birds, especially when seen with the sunlight striking at an angle, reflecting the bright sheen of their feathers.

At first they were extremely shy, and I had to remain very still in my chair beside the stoep table. Gradually their confidence grew, and before long they and I were firm friends. Maybe one of these birds was the offspring of a previous cheese-eating Glossy Starling – otherwise, how had the message of the cheese dish reached them?

At first there was only one. Then a second and slightly smaller bird arrived. I noticed that it had completely dark eyes, and thought that it may be a young bird.

No doubt it was, because after a few weeks its irises had turned to the usual bright orange colour. However, I have not read any such change taking place, in any of the bird books in my possession, and it is possible that this may have been a singularly peculiar happening.

On one Sunday morning in July, I looked out and saw only one of the Glossy Starlings waiting on the electric light standard that was used as a preliminary perch. I set the cheese dish on the table and the solitary bird flew down at once. I spoke to it animatedly, asking where was its mate? Its absence mystified me and I was upset, for they were such inseparables.

Then I heard a heavy flutter of wings as Blue Boy's mate arrived. To my surprise it landed directly on the table top instead of going through the usual performance of reaching the table by stages. It landed heavily. Also unusual was its stance, on only one leg.

Strangely, and with a touch of presentiment, I have thought only the day before what fine strong legs these starlings have, and such hard, horny claws. They do not seem to suffer from injuries to their legs and feet as do the wagtails and sparrows, in particular, and some of the other small species.

I chided young Blue Boy, remarking how cold it was, and damp, at early morning on winter days. That winter was exceptionally cold, and I thought the young bird must be suffering from rheumatism in the leg which it held close to its breast feathers for warmth.

Slowly, ever so slowly, it lowered its left foot. Then I saw, to my horror, that the toes were clenched together and hung uselessly to one side, twisted round at an acute angle. They hung like a bunch of rotten bananas. Blue Boy cocked its head to one side and looked at me queerly, as if inviting sympathy.

My first thought was that it had been shot, but on closer and more prolonged inspection I came to the conclusion that the injury had been brought about by other means than a bullet, or a stone from a catapult.

It was life itself, a cruel fate, which had dealt this blow. There was no other damage apparent, and the bird did not appear to be suffering in any physical sense, though its mental distress was obvious.

The foot looked so terribly twisted and distorted that I reckoned it to be utterly beyond hope of recovery. To catch the bird was out of the question, and in any case, what could I do to help? Perfectly fit the day before, now it was a cripple for life. I felt depressed, thwarted in my desire to be of use.

I spoke soothingly to the injured creature. My words came in a torrent of grief. I struggled to repress my feelings, but unavailingly. Then no more words would come, and I gave way to tears. I cried my heart out.

Young Blue Boy was one of my favourite birds. My distress at its pitiable condition cannot be put into words.

Before going any further with my story, I should explain that I had been under tremendous pressure at work in recent weeks, caught up in a web of power-seeking intrigues from which there was no escape. Inner tension had built up and up. The job itself was all right, but behind the scenes there was the seething,

boiling turmoil of a big-business take-over. Amid this I could find no relief of any sort, let alone by means of tears, which normally serve as nature's safety valve.

Yet now there was a sudden spasmodic flood of uncontrollable tears.

Both birds, the fit one as well as the stricken one, were aware of my concern. Of this there can be no doubt. I knew from the way they cocked their heads sideways, to an extent more extreme than before. It was not the so-called displacement activity common amongst birds and other creatures. This was something much deeper and more profound. It was a pathetic touching little scene. Almost heartrending.

The maimed bird made a few feeble attempts to reach down to the cheese, but it was not adept at balancing on one leg and nearly toppled over. Giving up, it turned awkwardly and flew to a bare branch on the poinsettia.

Then the most wonderful thing happened.

Despite its dreadful affliction, the bird sang to me. Melodiously, it used the familiar "Choi-choi" notes of happier days of old.

Four times it sang to me. It did so in reassurance, as though urging me not to grieve too much. Yes, **four** times, again the association with four.

But I felt bitter about life, with its cloak-and-dagger workers, busily toppling those who stand in their way, seeking promotion by any means, no matter how unfair. And now there was this crippling of one of my favourite wild birds.

From the poinsettia, Blue Boy flew away to the north-east, while its mate went for a drink at the ground-level bath before joining it.

I related the sorry story to my wife over breakfast, and she cried also. Then she went on to provide the sort of womanly philosophy that was needed at the time. Of course I knew already that my grief was vain and worthless.

Vain yes. But was it altogether worthless? I wonder. Tears and prayers, what power have they?

The two Glossy Starlings did not return at noon, as they usually did at the weekends when I was about the place all the time.

Then, at 4 o'clock, I called from the front door and received an answering "Choi-choi". Hurriedly I set the **dish of cheese on the table and waited**. One of the starlings came at once and fed eagerly. It was the fit bird. As expected, and feared, there was only the one.

Then suddenly there was another heavy whirr of wings and the second starling appeared. It landed on the roof this time, its tail feathers protruding beyond the guttering. From there it made a difficult turn and flew on to the table, by-passing the poinsettia. I braced myself for the shock, hardly daring to look. My Blue Boy, crippled and helpless. Greatly dependent upon my meagre offerings, which were intended as nothing more than titbits.

Then I plucked up courage and looked. Oh joy!

To my intense surprise and delight the bird landed on **both** feet, quite nicely but somewhat hesitantly.

I was amazed. The crippled foot was straight again. How good life seemed once more.

I greeted Blue Boy excitedly, so much so that my excitement seeped through to the bird.

Momentarily, a horrid doubt assailed me. This could not be the same bird. It must be another young one, a newcomer, perhaps a new, fit mate for the healthy starling. However, I soon noticed that its left foot was slightly clenched and twisted. I knew without need for further proof that it was indeed my own Blue Boy.

"This", I said, speaking out loud, "is a miracle". And so it seemed.

To avoid any likelihood of falsification, I will quote directly from my Bird Diary: "I no longer pray", I wrote "but perhaps my tears on this occasion, so spontaneous, were the sincerest form of prayer. Perhaps they were effective, more so than any mumbled prayer could have been".

Had a minor miracle been worked? Are tears stronger than words, more powerful than prayers? I will leave others to decide. All I can say is that most certainly I had considered Blue Boy's foot to be so bad as to be permanently damaged, impossible of repair.

With the obliterating passage of time, I had to convince myself that it was not a dream, a figment of my imagination. But there is my Bird Diary as proof. It was not a dream, it was not imagination playing false. The day-to-day occurrences were set down at the time, indelibly. Oh yes, it happened right enough, just as I have recorded it, without embellishment, with no more emotion than was displayed at the time.

Miracle or no miracle, often I think back to it, and to a childhood book which remains in my memory though its title is forgotten. It was one of those large books beloved of children, with big print and full-page illustrations in colour. It included some of Longfellow's better-known epics, including *The song of Hiawatha* and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*.

What I remember most clearly about this book is a full-page illustration of Hiawatha, bow in hand and quiver full of arrows slung across one shoulder. The young hunter was striding through the forest, with hares sitting beside the trail, and birds in the trees. According to the legend at the foot of the page, they were saying, "Do not shoot us, Hiawatha".

These words bring to mind some of my own experiences, particularly one in far-off, remote Tibet.

Beyond the small village of Sar Lachen my party, which included Tenzing who was not then world famous, another Sherpa, Ang Dowa, and a Tibetan whose pack animals we were using, took a narrow trail along the floor of a valley in which there were a number of shallow lakes. After meandering over a sandy, pebble-strewn wasteland, our trail led between boulders to a region of coarse, tufted grasses.

Here we encountered wild life in abundance – but it was not really wild. The birds and beasts around us lived in full freedom, without fear, as I imagine the creatures of earlier times lived when firearms were not yet invented. Hares scampered alongside, pied crows hopped within easy reach, all quite unafraid. Had I been so brutally disposed, I could have lunged out and kicked them, they came so near. They were not yards away, but only inches. This is a fact, not fiction, strange as it may sound.

Two handsome Brahminy Duck, with plumage most beautifully coloured in orange, brown, white, green and blue-black, loitered between us and the nearest

stretch of water. When I reached the water's edge and knelt there, the fish did not dart away in fear, as usually happens, but remained idly swimming round as I gazed down at them.

Though we had far to travel that day, and weighty problems burdened my mind, I recalled the words of the hare and its fellow creatures in *The Song of Hiawatha*: "Do not shoot us Hiawatha".

I wish I had the book with me still, but alas I gave it away many years ago. Sometimes I wish I had not parted with it, and yet I now have something far, far better than the printed word and the painted scene – I have the living, undying experience.

From this, it will be clear why I gain so much sheer delight from walking freely amongst the free creatures of the wilds, and think so highly of my friendships with wild birds, and hares, and even snakes, at home and in the open spaces. It will be clear, too, why I have so much dislike for the caging of birds and beasts, and the sacrificing of them for heart transplant and other surgical experiments.

Occasionally, but only when the necessity arises, I have handled birds. No bird friend of mine has been 'finger trained'.

I prefer it this way. All are free to come and go at will. There may be a temporary ache when long-standing friendship is broken, but there is lasting pleasure in the thought that no physical persuasion is made use of at any time. Our friendships, shorn of physical contact, are as pure as can be.

Give a bird a bad name

As the world's human population grows, as we reach farther into the open spaces with our industrial areas and accompanying housing sites, so the wild birds and beasts have to make way. Ours is an expansion, theirs a retraction. But there is a limit to their retreat. They can go so far and no farther in making way for us. We, for our part, have a greater chance to demonstrate flexibility.

One of my aims in these broadcasts is to show that we need not obliterate all forms of non-human life in order to ensure our own survival and material prosperity. To a far greater extent than we care to admit, we can accommodate the wild creatures in our own living spaces. To do this, however, we need to make certain adjustments. Most importantly, we need to overcome the killing instinct which is a hangover from earlier days of grosser, less civilised living.

So often I hear people, elderly as well as young, seeking justification to kill. It has been a habit down through the years, and they do not know how to break away from it. For a change, I should like to hear every reason to let live, and only as a last resort the order to kill. This calls for education, the **right** kind of education.

The common killing urge affects the Fiscal Shrike more than any of the other small birds of Southern Africa. The law of the human jungle – to kill first and enquire afterwards – is considered good enough for the Fiscal Shrike or Jackhanger, itself said to be a rapacious killer.

But is it a wanton killer? Most certainly not. Is it a killer at all? Only when necessity drives. In our gardens, where cheese is plentiful, the Fiscal Shrikes have not been known to kill a single bird for their larders.

On the contrary, from personal observations covering several generations of Fiscal Shrikes, I am led to believe that they are far more good than bad in their make-up. I will be more emphatic and say that there are one of the finest of all species, highly intelligent, adaptable, given to acts of extreme unselfishness.

Would **you** vacate your home voluntarily in favour of your offspring? Yet the female Fiscal Shrike does this for her own female young. It is not being too melodramatic to say that they are as self-sacrificing in their way as was Oates of the Antarctic.

The male is a doting mate, Serving the mother-to-be in all her needs, tenderly feeding her with choice titbits. The female is a patient mother, forbearing in the extreme. The young females are cared for over a very considerable period of time.

During the course of several years we have had Jackie One, Two, Three and Four, each with its singular personality, all very much alike in looks and character and yet with distinctive ways of their own. No two are quite alike.

Jackie 2 stayed with us longest of all. She won our lasting affection, and more than this, our admiration. From her we gained a great deal of information about Fiscal Shrikes in general. Born and bred in our garden, she answered to her name readily – when she felt like doing so. When in the sulks, she disregarded all our overtures. In this mood she went so far as to turn her back upon us with a quick reversal of position that was more eloquent than words. Or she merely sat where she was, fluffed her feathers and opened and closed her beak soundlessly in a gesture of yawning boredom.

In this mood, as my wife put it, “Jackie gave us the big brush-off”.

Without a shadow of a doubt she had her varying moods, and we loved her all the more for it. In all respects she was a character in her own right, and ‘people-watched’ by the hour. I have reason to believe that there was not a minute of the day when she did not know where we were.

One wild, wet day in September, I sat at the stoep table reading and writing, the rain tumbling down unabated. There were no bird callers, and I did not expect any. It was one of those days that are not fit for bird nor beast nor man. I must have sat there for well over an hour, completely absorbed in what I was doing, oblivious of the fact that I was not alone.

Suddenly, to my astonishment, there came a sound, repeated, slight but insistent, a bird call of sorts. It came from behind and to my right. At length, turning, I saw Jackie 2 for the first time. Unbeknown to me, she had taken shelter when the downpour started, and had been there ever since, perched on a canary creeper which formed a screen for part of the stoep.

Her call was made specially to attract my attention. She must have become aware that I did not know of her presence, because normally I talked to her at intervals when she was around, keeping human company, as she loved to do.

I made up for my remissness by apologising profusely, knowing that the words themselves would mean nothing to her, but equally aware that the tone of voice would register, penetrating the barrier to understanding.

And so it proved. She had made her presence known, in the only way possible, and then was content to remain quietly where she was until the storm had abated. Then she flew away.

If her behaviour on this occasion did not reflect intelligence of a high order, and not only that, but initiative, then I am no judge of human or bird behaviour.

On another occasion she remained with me so long, people-watching from the poinsettia, that I went indoors for pencil and paper and made several sketches of her. Also she kept close company when I mowed the lawns, swooping down to obtain disturbed insects. And when I dug the vegetable patches, she was there to collect the exposed cut-worms and slugs.

Gardening time was Jackie's time.

The Jackie 2's time came to leave. She had produced male offspring before and had sent them off to pastures new, in accordance with the accepted habit of her kind. Now, with the rearing of her second family, which included a female, she vacated as her mother before her had done. Such is duty.

She left a gap in our lives – but also she left Jackie 3, her female youngster. And so the rift in friendship was filled, life forever changing, yet continuing much the same as before.

A bird often mistaken for the Fiscal Shrike is the Fiscal Flycatcher although there are marked differences between the two in size and colour. The flycatchers are smaller and daintier, and brown and grey predominates in their plumage rather than black and white. When hunting for insects they use an urgent little call consisting of four or five notes, very rapidly and insistently given as though to flush out insects from their hiding places. Sometimes I have heard them make a single small piping note without any accompanying movement of the beak, so that it is difficult to distinguish its source. Occasionally they dive-bomb other small birds, especially wagtails, after the manner of Fiscal Shrikes. However they do not press home the attacks, and one gains the impression that they are nothing more than prankish gestures. Apart from this, they are free of vice and very useful to have

about the garden. Altogether they are delightful creatures, friendly and desirous of human company.

In fact the very first of the birds to come to our cheese dish, the one who inaugurated the whole procedure, was a young flycatcher. This was strange, because ordinarily they are shy, retiring birds. As a rule they are not seen much except at early morning and again at dusk. Yet this particular flycatcher became so trusting as to perch on the arm of the chair beside me.

Then for more than a year we were without any flycatchers and could not understand why. Later we had three regular callers and a couple of others – five in all. Departing from their normal secretiveness, they came occasionally at mid-day or any odd hour, even on the hottest of days. They grew to be the most trusting of all our free, wild birds.

One of our male flycatchers, a bird of outstanding character and individuality, was Dagwood. I gave him this name because of his distinct fly-away eyebrows, or what appeared to be eyebrows. He was a most comical looking fellow. In more than looks he reminded me of Chic Young's comic masterpiece, Dagwood.

His mate I called Brownie, for she was distinctly brown, whereas Dagwood was much darker, with black and white contrasting in his feathers. She was gentle and mild, brave and dauntless in our company, whereas Dagwood had a bold streak about him and was something of a dashing fellow.

They brought up their young, duly introduced them to us, and later went their way. Always the partings leave a sense of loss. But partings there must be, and to compensate we develop memory.

Also among the first to be with us, though never coming on to the table for cheese, was Little Face at Window, a Cardinal Woodpecker. Really there were two of them, male and female, but there was room enough for one only at the window, as we called the entrance to their nest in the stump of the *Hakea* tree near the side door to our house. So both had to be known by one and the same name. (Incidentally, the *Hakeas* of South Africa, which was introduced from Australia, are extremely unpopular. They spread in alarming manner and tend to create a fire hazard).

Always when I went to work, and again when I returned home, there was a little face peering out at me from the tree stump. This went on for more than a year.

To be seen off by one's wife, and to be greeted back by her, is commonplace – very nice, the done thing in married life, but commonplace. To be seen off by one's wife and by a woodpecker, and to be greeted on return by woodpecker and then wife, is quite unusual, I am sure. I loved it while it lasted. I was getting the better of two worlds as it were.

They grew used to my words, "I see you Little Face at Window, I see you". I imitated their rather mournful cries, and if one or the other was not already at the window, then it soon appeared. While I watered the flowers and shrubs round about, two eager eyes kept watch. As I moved from side to side of the nest, so the eyes followed my movements. Curiosity is not a singularly human trait, but is shared by all sensitive creatures.

Often, one of the birds spent a few minutes peering out, then launched itself from the nest, whereupon its mate took its turn at watching while I worked. It was as though the two woodpeckers had an agreement to share alike the delight of people-watching from the neat round hole to their nest.

A tragedy occurred at the first nesting time. I found an egg on the ground below, and later there was a fledgling beneath the nest. This is buried in my Bird Cemetery in a secluded part of the garden nearby. The second hatching produced a fine healthy young one, and when it had flown the nest was abandoned by the parents.

Shortly afterwards, some of our neighbour's children entered by the back gate and broke down the nest, bisecting it lengthwise. No doubt they had hoped to find eggs, or young ones, but fortunately the nest had served its purpose to conclusion. By this act of vandalism I was able to see what I would not have seen otherwise. I was able to inspect as thorough a job of engineering construction and of carpentry as one could wish to see. It was a real craftsman's masterpiece, a work of art.

I often think back to those working days when I let duty bound to leave sufficient time on hand for my regular morning and evening meetings with the two Cardinal Woodpeckers. Briefcase in hand, I called to them in what I fondly imagined was bird talk – woodpecker language. Whether it was a fair assumption or not, out

popped a little face in answer. The reaction was invariable. The response never failed.

It was the same when I returned home. I had only to imitate their cry, or call out “Little Face at Window”, and again the face appeared, the strong beak swivelling round as the inquisitive eyes followed my movements, watching intently, without a trace of fear, but ever alert.

“Little Face at Window, I see you, I see you” – this was my everyday greeting, and they came to recognise the words in much the same way as the Dikkops in the fallow field had come to know my “Talk and talk and talk”.

More than could have been possible with any caged birds, the friendly woodpeckers brought a sense of affinity. They were wild, yet strangely tame and trusting. They were captive in a nest of their own making, yet free to come and go as they wished.

To me, at the time and in retrospect, this wild bird friendship was as near ideal as could be. There were no demands on either side, no sacrifices were called for, no arrangements had to be made. I know of no other relationship for which life exacts no tolls, makes no punishments and offers only rewards.

Callers, regular and irregular

Some of my wild bird friends have been friends in distress. Limpy the Wagtail was one. He had a badly deformed right foot. His infirmity gave him courage, lent him boldness, for not other wagtail was brave enough to fly on to the table and help itself to cheese from the dish.

To our delight we saw Limpy's condition improve noticeably, helped by our provision of highly nutritive protein worms – “cheese worms”, we call them. Few birds can resist cheese, but it needs to be cut up finely for the smaller birds, and there seems to be a decided preference for the rind of strong Cheddar.

After rearing a fine family, Limpy left, being sufficiently stable on his stump and one sound foot to be able to fend for himself. His mate never sought the limelight. It was as though she remained purposefully in the background so as to allow Limpy to take all that came his way.

Later we had another Limpy, in much greater distress, having only a stump in place of a sound right leg, and with only two toes on his left foot. These injuries came from the nest, as a result of entwining threads.

So we called this one Limpy-Limpy, doubling up on the name because of the double infirmity. Yet he remained as perky as could be and became father of six perfect babies from three hatchings. He managed to forage on his own, sometimes balancing on the one stump of a leg while holding the other close to his breast for warmth and comfort.

How he spent his nights I can only guess, but once he astonished me by calling out shrilly, demanding attention. Looking on the ground, where I expected to find him, I could see no wagtail. The shrill cry was repeated. Then, glancing up, I saw him perched on the branch of a tree. His pride was obvious, and it did me good to see it. Of such stuff are heroes made.

His wife was a lovable creature, sound of limb and full of bounce. Yet she remained very much in the background at feeding times, as though not to challenge her mate's greater need of the sustaining cheese worms. Some creatures are rapacious and unsympathetic, but she was not.

A change came over her whenever there were young ones newly off the nest, clamorous for food. Then she stepped forward and took over full responsibility, to the extent of coming right into our lounge for cheese.

At such times, both birds came onto the stoep at the crack of dawn and called me from my warm bed with unusually piercing chirps, the import of which was unmistakable. Usually Limpy-Limpy took his stance on the ground while his mate called out in duet from a branch of the poinsettia. When this happened on the coldest of winter mornings, it was beyond a joke, and many were the times when I climbed out of bed grumpily and braved the elements in order to satisfy the urgent demands of these two rapsallions.

I have heard tell of a game warden in New Zealand who called up wild birds. Well, I had wild birds who called **me** out of bed at early morning. Apart from these two wagtails, Dagwood and Brownie the flycatchers also did the same thing with just as much insistence. Later, Blue Boys joined in with even greater clamour.

Indeed this is a strange world, peopled by strange folk. And there exists some extraordinary wild creatures as well.

Once we had an Indian Mynah with a broken leg, which healed but left it with a permanent limp. We called him Limpy Minah.

These birds are not liked as a rule, but Limpy Minah proved the exception to the rule. This unfortunate bird had two handicaps in life. He had a bad leg, and he had to combat the common dislike, bordering upon hatred, for all Indian Minahs. Limpy Minah overcame both handicaps.

As a result of their persecution, all other Mynahs were too frightened to approach closely, let alone come on to the table for cheese. But Limpy Mynah did: his physical infirmity spurred him to overcome the inherent fear.

Limpy Mynah called regularly and chatted long in most friendly and confiding manner, often going so far as to sing melodiously and not at all like a Mynah, which normally has no song.

At first I merely tolerated the bird; then I came to like him and finally to accept him as a firm friend. His condition improved markedly, thanks to the cheese, and when the other Mynahs were ready to make for their breeding grounds, Limpy Minah was able to accompany them.

Bundly had a different kind of leg affliction. A female wagtail, she came to us with bundles of tissue adorning her legs. She left us fit and well, completely free of the earlier scaly growths. No handling was needed. The improvement was brought about by cheese and friendship.

Later there was One-Hop, a male sparrow, undersized, pitifully handicapped from the start. Strangely, though roosting by the hundreds in a nearby avenue of blue gums, the sparrows did not come to our garden for bread crumbs. Then the word got abroad, and we had many sparrows. Nevertheless, One-Hop was outstanding. One of a crowd, yet one on his own.

He had only one leg, or one leg and a short stump, and hopped along as best he could, using his breast as a buttress. He carried his burden bravely. From his special perch, in the fork of a dead branch which I planted near his feeding place, he sang to us joyfully and for long. Sometimes he merely chirped, like others of his kind, but at his best he sang like a little canary, on and on, not at all like a sparrow. Song, for him, served as a compensatory factor.

Whenever I looked at him, and heard him singing so wondrously, I felt slightly ashamed, and vexed with myself for not carrying my own burdens with less obvious care. It took One-Hop to lift me out of myself, away from my petty troubles, away from imagined, crippling woes.

To think of One-Hop was to think of courage, bravery, the overcoming of adversity. Often in contemplation of him, I pinned medals on his breast, and so he came to wear, metaphorically, the Victoria Cross, the George Cross for Bravery, the Croix de Guerre ...

One-Hop had a mate, and she also was a personality in her own right. She had a habit of asking for cheese with her back turned towards me. When a piece of cheese was thrown, she took it and then turned her back again, glanced over one shoulder and said "Chirr-er, Chirr-er" until another piece was thrown. For this reason she was known as Chirr-er. She was a fitting mate for One-Hop, who deserved nothing less.

It will be appreciated that not one of the birds I have mentioned so far was touched by hand. Each was a purely wild creature, entirely free to come and go of its own volition.

However, there have been a few wild birds that I have had reason to handle briefly. On one occasion I was called to a garden in the village where, I was told, there was a “strange bird” which appeared to be injured and could not stand properly.

Hurrying along, I found nothing really strange about the bird. Nor was there any sign of injury. It was a Red-Knobbed Coot, and it behaved somewhat drunkenly, but only because it was away from its natural habitat and lacked the essential support of water.

With all haste I took it to a nearby dam and released it. After standing awhile in the shallows where I had placed it, the coot swam idly away. It had not ventured far when to my surprise it turned and swam back towards me. It seemed reluctant to regain its freedom. I thought it was going to come right out of the water, but having approached to within a yard it headed back for open water and full freedom, swimming strongly.

Why had it been so reluctant to swim away? Was its act in turning and swimming back a gesture of friendliness and thanks to me, its benefactor? Was this a gesture of appreciation to me, who had granted it freedom?

Or was it a more absent-minded move, something done in a moment of extreme aberration?

Of course I prefer to believe the former, that it was a mute gesture of friendliness, as it may have been in truth.

This is not as far-fetched as some might think. The fact is that many wild birds demonstrate a strong desire for human company.

In particular, the little flycatchers did this, often nestling on the rim of the cheese dish, gazing round and about, looking at me, absorbed in all that went on, interested in everything except the cheese at their feet. Brownie did this to extraordinary extent. Sometimes it became distinctly embarrassing, as when it was past time for me to leave for work.

This leads me to consideration of an important point, one which I wish to stress.

It does not matter whether I am right or wrong in my assumption regarding the behaviour of the coot when I released it. Whether its act was one of instinctive

friendliness or merely an act without any motive at all – this is of no real significance.

The important point is my appreciation of what happened, my comprehension of all that surrounds the known facts.

It has been said that “Our world is as it is in our comprehension; the thought and existence are commingled”.

As I interpret this in relation to the coot incident at the dam, it means that the actual behaviour of the bird was not all that mattered. What drove the bird to act as it did is of no real concern. **Coupled with the act was my reaction to it.** “Our world is as it is in our comprehension ...”

Whether you agree with this or not, there is no doubt in my mind that the wild birds, in free association with us, have much to convey, much to teach us, providing only that we show the willingness to learn, and grant the courtesy of accepting them into our lives as fully as possible.

I could go on telling of my wild bird friendships and of the rewards accruing from them. But rather than tell too much, I would tell too little. Rather than divulge all, I would leave the appetite whetted but not satiated. So now is the time to draw to a close with a few final observations of a personal nature.

It is often said of people, disparagingly, that they are bird-brained. This infers that they are lacking in intelligence. I have no idea how the saying originated, but it is quite untrue, and in relation to the wild birds I have introduced in these talks it represents an insult.

Bird-brained indeed! I have known Jackie 2, the Fiscal Shrike, to perch near my chair and look me straight in the eye, unflinching, and it has been possible to “see her mind working”.

On occasions such as this the high intelligence of these birds shines forth. We cannot fathom their thought processes; we can only measure the size of their brains and proclaim them to be of small account. But often I have wondered what is contained in those tiny bird-brains, how much animal wisdom lurks there. And if I could, I would share it with them.

I have gone to some length to indicate how wild birds, in full freedom, respond to friendship. Of equal importance is how we ourselves respond to the latent friendship of creatures of the wilds.

With so little animal and bird life remaining throughout the world, we no longer have the right to kill needlessly. The time is ripe for change. To this end, I suggest that we should abandon our attempts at proving the **differences** between animal and human make-up and behaviour. Rather, let us concentrate upon what is common to all, the struggle which is universal, the desire to exist, the yearning to display our individual natures, the craving to be accepted for what we are.

Valid excuses for killing are hard to find nowadays. Therefore I deplore especially the prevalence of killing that still goes on in the name of science. Surely there is no longer the need to kill birds in order to report upon the contents of their crops. Yet ornithologists continue to do this, organising costly expeditions, bringing back their dead collections, verifying what countless others have proved already.

Killing is a contagious disease. Like violence, it spreads. The virus is in us, and bare **suggestion** can make it active. But as this is true, so it is true also that the desire to **save** can be catching, and its suggestion can lead to positive action. We need to realise this for ourselves, and for the sake of those who will inherit what we leave behind in this world of so much human and animal potential.

I hope it will be understood that I make no direct appeal to human emotion. To **sensibility**, yes, but not to emotion.

It is **sensible** to look for friendship and love, rather than to provoke enmity and hatred, fear and hostility. The undeniable truth is that we stand to gain immeasurably.

What I have achieved in my friendships with wild birds, others can achieve. What I have gained as reward, others may gain.

May your friendships with the wild creatures of this earth be as numerous and richly rewarding as mine have been.

Boubou Shrikes, 14, 15, 16, 21
Brahminy Duck, 28
Buzzard, 18, 20
buzzards, 21, 23
Buzzards, 18, 22, 23
Cardinal Woodpecker, 33
Cardinal Woodpeckers., 34
coot, 39, 40
Dikkop, 10, 11, 12
Dikkops, 10, 11, 13, 22, 35
eagles, 23
Fiscal Shrike, 21, 30, 32, 40
Fiscal Shrikes, 30, 31, 32
flycatcher, 33
flycatchers, 32, 33, 37, 39
Glossy Starlings, 24, 26
goshawk, 21

hawks, 23
Indian Mynah, 37
Jackhanger, 30
larks, 21, 23
Red-Knobbed Coot, 39
sparrow, 38
sparrowhawks, 21
starlings, 24, 25, 27
Steppe Buzzard, 20
Steppe Buzzards, 18, 20, 21, 22
wader, 21
wagtail, 36, 38
Wagtail, 36
wagtails, 21, 25, 32, 37
warblers, 21, 23
woodpecker, 34