A Life in the Countryside

JANE POPE



Fascinated by my grandparents' pond.

As I watch a flock of fieldfares begin their cleaning-up operation in the orchard, I reflect on my close relationship with the natural world and with the nine large Bramley apple trees which were planted when I was born. Their lives have mirrored mine, or vice versa. There are cavities and pieces have dropped off, they are hosts to ivy and mistletoe but they still do their best for the creatures that share their space, including me.

As a toddler I was fascinated by my grandparents' garden, by the variety of flowers and vegetables, the chickens and especially by the pond. My grandfather, in particular, encouraged my interest and had a good eye for detail. His father was a taxidermist, but perhaps the less said about that the better. It was mainly a Victorian fashion.

We moved to Trimpley when I was about six years old. Our land had been bought six years earlier and fruit trees planted but building materials were scarce after the war and progress was slow.

My parents were determined that I should attend the local school where there was only one class and one teacher. After various deliberations a second teacher was appointed and the classroom divided with a heavy green curtain! My teacher was a great friend and I was very happy at Trimpley school. What it lacked in History, Geography and Team Sports it made up for in Nature Study and Country Dancing. We were required to write a diary and at the age of seven I wrote "I saw a toad hoping along the road". What it was hoping for I don't know, but probably a mate since its life was on the line. I had failed to notice that toads don't "hope". We were also asked to make a book about some aspect of nature and I chose birds. At the age of nine I wrote "The jay is a bird of doughtful character". It seems less doubtful now even if it can be predatory and pecks fruit buds.

Ours was a church school and we went to church on special occasions such as Rogation Sunday and Harvest Festival. There was not a tin or packet to be seen at the latter. We were taken on a nature walk every week. I was aware that the teacher liked to know what was going on in the village, but we were learning about the local flora and fauna. There was an annual pupils' garden competition. Each pupil marked out a small plot at home and was asked to cultivate it without adult help. Towards the Summer Holiday a local dignitary came with the teacher to offer praise and award prizes.

At home, my father was usually out-of-doors. He had been brought up near the River Arrow in Warwickshire and had explored the local countryside. Throughout his life he worked for Post Office Main Cables but his second job was growing soft fruit which he took to the wholesale market in Birmingham. My mother always loved plants and, as a child, was brought spare seedlings by a local gardener who understood her interest. Later in life she showed a liking for the Latin names. Both parents enjoyed working in the garden until they were very elderly.

I have lived here for more than seventy years, not counting absences for college purposes. When we first came here there were only two cottages along a farm track. Our land was bought from the grandfather of the present farmer. I remember flocks of lapwings following the plough and native partridges on the field edges. Skylarks were plentiful and cuckoos came in April, filling the woods with their calls. The fields were full of wild flowers – daisies, cowslips, speedwell, buttercups, Lady's Smock – and there was much in the hedgerows including primroses, wood sorrel, violets, archangel and arum. I still have the original hedge whereas most people now have walls or conifers. We used to dawdle home from primary school and search for four-leafed clovers on the verges.

Behind the cottages was a paddock which was home to a pair of heavy horses, and guinea fowl roosted in damson trees along the lane. Many hours were spent at a local farm and we made cycle racetracks in the woods. A friend lived in a 'proper' gypsy caravan on the green and her father made clothes pegs with lengths of green wood split at one end and bound with a strip of tin at the other. My friends and I roamed freely, untroubled by modern anxieties.

Over the years, there have been many memorable incidents connected with nature and the garden.



Too big for the nest - a typical cuckoo chick.

Once a cuckoo took over a dunnock's nest by the gate. It was amazing to see the little dunnock feeding a huge baby which overhung the nest. On another occasion I saw what I thought was a woodpecker on the trunk of a cordyline palm tree. Then I saw it was brown with strange markings and was behaving oddly. It turned out to be a wryneck. One very hard winter a woodcock came into the garden and was seen probing beneath shrubs where the ground was less frozen. On a less happy note, my favourite robin, following me to the garden shed, was taken from under my nose by a sparrowhawk which descended from the top of a large conifer, mantled the poor unsuspecting robin and made off with it for supper.

One sunny day I had gone into the fruit cage to pick plums. There, coiled on a heap of dry thistle stalks was a magnificent grass snake. "Hi Nat" I said – I figured his name must be Nat (*Natrix natrix*). He raised his head and we scrutinised each other for some considerable time. Eventually he slid lazily into the undergrowth and I continued picking plums.

Occasionally I found Large Elephant Hawk-moth caterpillars in a patch of rosebay willowherb and the largest ones would wander about looking for somewhere to pupate. I kept one in a box of leaves until it had pupated then put it in a large tin with a ventilated cover. I sank the tin into the earth at the foot of a south wall and checked on it regularly. In Spring I brought it into the house and was rewarded with a beautiful pristine moth to draw and paint before it eventually left in the evening. More recently I found a Convolvulus Hawk-moth near the greenhouse. It seemed immobile but disappeared in the evening.

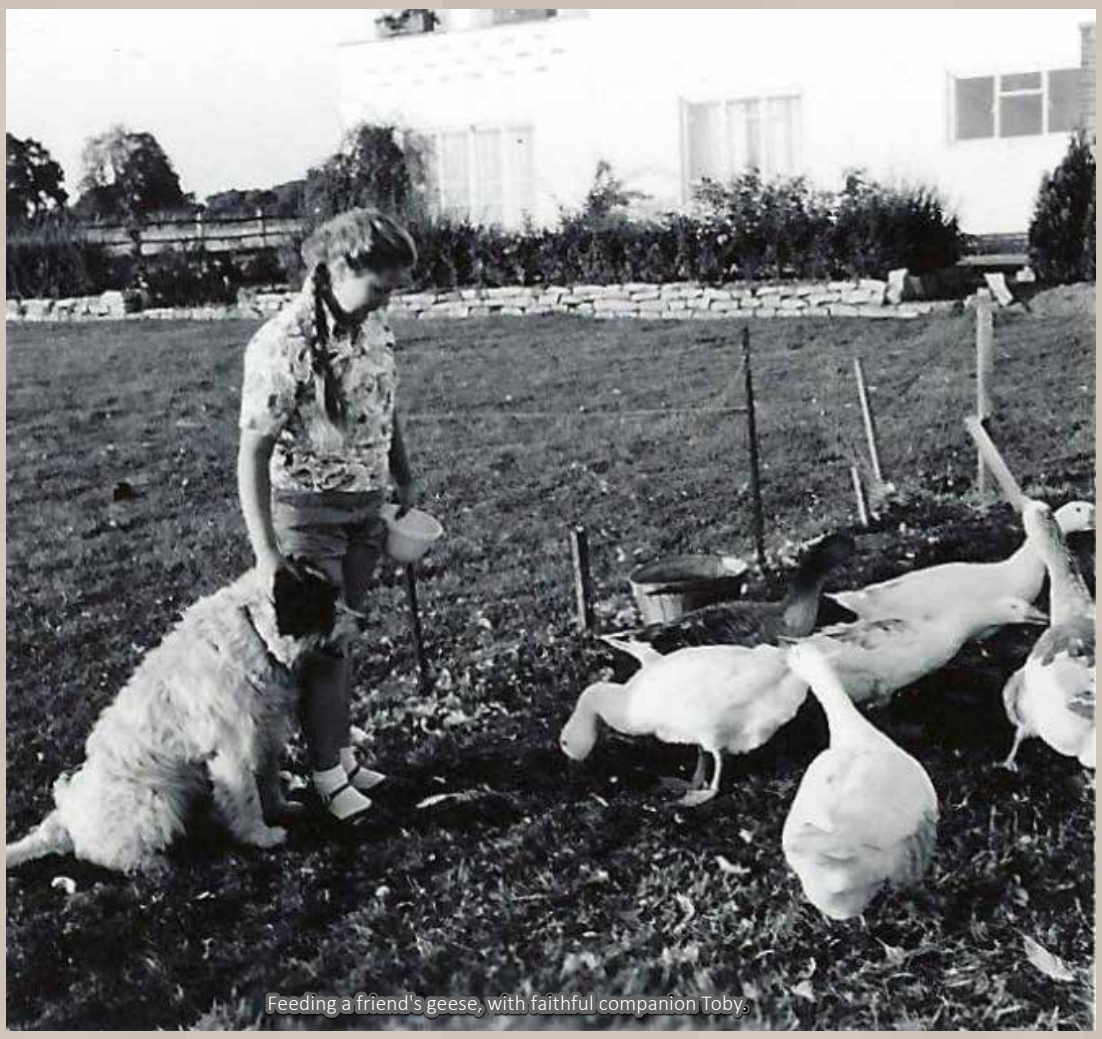
My companion during the whole of lockdown was a brown hare. For more than two years she spent a great deal of time in my garden. I knew where she might be resting and when I was nearby, I would call to her so that she recognized me and did not need to run. During morning and evening she would nibble on the lawn while I was gardening. Sometimes she disappeared for a couple of weeks but would always return. I once saw her boxing a smaller hare – maybe a suitor and she wasn't ready. On one occasion I was watching from the window and she was dozing on the lawn. A cheeky young magpie approached too closely and she sprang up into a sitting position and glared. The magpie backed off but then, when she had settled again it tried approaching from the rear. Suddenly the hare spun round a full half circle and glared again, whereupon the magpie made a hasty retreat! When she stretched, I would marvel at how tall she was and I noticed how meticulously she cleaned her coat. Eventually I noticed that she was looking older and then she was there no more. She was a beautiful animal and I could not have wished for a better companion during that strange time. Meanwhile I had noticed a half-grown leveret in the shrubbery, probably her son and recognizable by beautifully marked ears. He is fully grown now and regularly visits several gardens.



The leveret is now fully grown. Graham Motteram

The garden, like the larger landscape, is always changing. Two years ago, my Victoria plum tree split apart after bearing too much fruit. I had neglected to thin it. A new plum tree was planted, then a year later I lost a beautiful ornamental white cherry. It flowered magnificently at Easter and shortly afterwards came down in high winds. The trunk was completely hollow and rotten and there was 'horses' hoof' fungus on the bole, but I don't know whether that was cause or symptom. It has since put up shoots from the outer layer and is trying to regenerate.

The present state of the natural world concerns me, though there is still plenty to marvel at. Here we have lost skylarks and lapwings, and I am lucky if I hear a cuckoo, but I still have curlews - their cry never fails to thrill me – and I can watch the tumbling courtship of the ravens. The lack of insects is a cause for concern and it has made me pay closer attention to them. I have been lucky enough to find the Wyre Forest Study Group and to share their knowledge, even though I am just a generalist and a spotter. My garden is fairly wild but I'm able to share it with an assortment of creatures. I have not used chemicals for many years. The grassland is full of voles and there are hedgehogs beneath the shed. In these days of climate change, intensive farming and pollution we wonder about the future. I hope that general awareness of the situation is growing and while it can be hard for the individual to make a difference perhaps collectively, we can do so. I would like today's young people to learn about nature. As a teacher, I have seen the rural science curriculum sacrificed to make way for new technology. The school where I taught for many years had a wonderful greenhouse, chickens, gerbils, guinea pigs, fish and plots of land for the children to cultivate. All that went, along with arts and school productions. Technology and work-related skills are important but maybe a change is on the way. Perhaps future generations will be more in tune with the natural world.



Feeding a friend's geese, with faithful companion Toby.