

Natural Poetry

PETER FREEMAN



Study Group in action, Buttonoak meadow

Rosemary Winnall

Buttonoak Meadow

We're all over the meadow, but I can't keep up
and I don't know any of their Latin names:
dock bug, shield bug, green huntsman,
long-winged conehead, fourteen spot. I don't know
the painted lady, small skipper, gatekeeper, peacock,
silver-washed fritillary, ringlet, marbled white.
Nor the hoverfly on sneezewort, cinnabar
on ragwort, crab spider on yarrow.

But I do know the shining guest ant:
Formicoxens nitidulus. I looked it up.
A lot smaller than its hosts the wood ants,
it goes about its business seemingly
unnoticed in the deadwood galleries
of their nests, dining on honeydew.
No one here is quite sure why it can do this
and none of us with our hand lenses can find it.



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Dunnock

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Dunnock

'Unobtrusive, quiet and retiring, without being shy, humble and homely

in its deportment and habits, sober and unpretending in its dress,

while still neat and graceful, the Dunnock exhibits a pattern which

many of a higher grade might imitate, with advantage to themselves

and benefit to others through an improved example.'

Reverend Frederick O. Morris
A History of British Birds 1853

How easy it is to get things wrong.
I've seen you fly in and out of the ivy
so often and thought only yesterday
the sparrows are back; it must be spring.

But I find I'm not the only one.
You've had so many names: hedge warbler,
hedge sucker, hedge accentor, -betty, -chat, -spadger,
winter nightingale, shuffle wing, black wren.

Who decides anyway? And why settle
on 'dunnock'
when 'dun' is a dull, drab brown and 'ock'
just means 'little'?

'Little brown job'? You're fulvus, buff, tawny,
brindled like crack willow and English oak
with a head and throat blue-grey as wood-smoke
eyes like beads of glazed mahogany.

I've watched you close up, but can't tell who
is who perched on the stump of orange blossom
or hopping about under the laburnum
but now I learn there is more to you

than a pair; there might be three or four
or more of you: a male and two females,
a female and two males, two or three males
and four or more females; a lot of parental care

so why not? As for coy, you're anything but.
I've read you can be at it twice an hour
that a male will peck a female's cloaca
to coax out a rival's sperm then deposit

his own as if to have the last word. Not so;
she can hold on to both sets of genes
so the last word is 'hers' it seems
but if an egg's not blue, it's a cuckoo.



Toads mating

Rosemary Winnall

Toads mating in St George's Pool

*'in midst of a sweet space of English hill,
dale and orchard, yet unhurt by the hand of man'*

John Ruskin

They were bubbling up in the green pool,
their heads rimmed with light, limbs akimbo
as they hung afloat, their bulging throats
rippling cloud.

Or underwater, thrusting along
in the whip-kick and glide of their swim
or wriggling and squirming in balls
of muscle and bone, mating as mass brawl.
And strung on submerged branches,
reeds and broken stems, the jellied
bead necklaces of their offspring.

Mum and Dad were alive the last time
I cast a shadow like this on my hands
and knees at the edge of the cress-pond
at the foot of the hill, a stone's throw
from our garden, my arm aching with cold
trawling duckweed and slime, roiling
a silt storm, fumbling under stones
for all the frogs, newts, tadpoles and spawn
I could find and keep as my own.

The best I could do now was to watch
the ground at my feet as dozens more
shuffled out of the dark of the year
but then I latched on to a pair in amplexus
half way up a brick stair waterfall;
he clasped her and she clung on
to the rungs of a delicate ladder
of twigs and straws that would bring them
back to where they were born
no matter how many times a splash flipped
them over and knocked them down.