

Giving nature wings

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Last night, in the comfortable place between sleep and waking, you half-heard familiar birds' voices, speaking of the sky. This morning, as you wake, the world, and your body in it, feel different: your bones light, your heart quick in your chest, your mind sharp, and your arms and hands cloaked in a fan of pinion feathers. You have become a bird.

Instinct draws you to the back door. It is a cold, clear February day but the contour feathers on your chest and back protect you. You know the need to fly but — birdhood thrown miraculously on you — your muscles lack the knowledge how. Standing by the door you make two tentative flaps and find yourself on the roof of the shed. Your next flap is bolder, propelling you into the cold bright sky above your home.

Everything you know grows smaller as you soar into a pale blue winter morning. Your house and garden are tiny now, and all the worries of your daily life, seen from a bird's perspective, tiny too. As you rise to higher altitude, and confidence in your new wings grows, you start to look around. To the north, from way up here, you see the long, shining sweep of the North Norfolk Coast. In the west, the sharp corner where the coast turns into the muddy bounty of the Wash. In the east, like veins and arteries coursing between organs, the rivers and pits of the Norfolk Broads.

Looking down, from where you circle among today's few harmless clouds, you see a skein of geese. Their blue-grey wings and shrill calls, heard clearly in the thin, cold air, tell you they are pinkfeet. They are bound north, leaving Norfolk for the year, first for Scotland, then fields in southern Iceland, before in April or May they move into the bleak tundra of Iceland's uplands to breed. Far beneath them, crowding round the crowns of poplars, you see rooks, already flirting with their colonies, toying with twigs, filling the morning with exuberant barks and trills.

What hits you most sharply from up here, from a falcon's lofty vantage, is just how little of the landscape we have left for nature. We nurture a societal myth that we are a nation of nature-lovers — benign custodians of the land for wildlife and for future generations — and we freely bend the evidence of our ears and eyes to sustain it. Here, though, aloft in the winter sky, you have a cold clarity of vision. Gone from beneath you are thousands of miles of thick, thorny hedges which, before the days of sheep mesh and barbed wire, kept stock out of crops. They were the homes of countless pairs of nesting birds — nightingales, linnets, yellowhammers, turtle doves — and were corridors across the arable landscape for countless species more. Gone are thousands of farm ponds too, filled in as fields and machinery became bigger, hungrier. Each pond was a precious ecosystem, sacrificed to the name of progress.

Gone are almost all our hay meadows too. Before the advent of nitrate fertilisers, thousands of grassy acres were thick with flowers every summer and loud with insects: clouds of butterflies above them; bees and hoverflies on every bloom; the corncrake rasping from within their fertile depths. Gone too most of our heaths and commons: wild, unforgiving places, half cloaked in gorse, where blackthorn and crab-apple rattled with the sparse song of the lesser whitethroat, and the woodlark poured his sad voice into the dawn. Gone, for centuries now, our great wetlands: our river floodplains and the vast marshes of the Fens and Broads, hemmed in and drained. What we have still is wondrous, but what we have stolen was beyond price.

With three strong flaps you dive towards the north coast and the sea, heading for Weybourne where East Norfolk's sandy cliffs arise. You turn your face into the west wind and glide towards Salthouse, Cley and Blakeney. Beneath you are hundreds of acres of grazing marsh, saltmarsh, reedbed and shingle, peopled by wigeon, curlew, redshank, lapwing and teal. A marsh harrier throws his lazy loops above the reed, his keen eye locked on a young rat on the muddy bank of a dyke. On the sea, beneath the long, up-tilted primaries of your right wing, there are red-throated divers, guillemots, great crested grebes, all just flushing with spring colours, in readiness for longer days next month. This glorious reach of coast briefly gives you hope: here is a place where nature thrives, where birds and other species live in abundance. But, like Broadland's rivers, and nature reserves across the county, this strip — as hard-fought as its protection has been — is a sticking plaster, peeling at the edges, between the sea, rising thanks to human-induced climate

change, and the roads, towns and endless monocultures with which we have filled the huge majority of our habitat.

You fly west along the coast, aghast that, all the way from Cley to Snettisham, our precious wildlife has been constrained to such a narrow, fragile ribbon of land, by our relentless hunger for progress. Then, as winter's shadows lengthen, and your new wings grow weary, you turn for home, landing softly in your own back garden, your mind reeling with all that you have seen.

You wake the next day, bleary. A thought hovers at the edge of consciousness: that for one short day you were released from sluggish bondage and set loose in the heavens. Your eyes open to the first light and, to your amazement, on your pillow is a single feather, barred and beautiful. You lift it to your lips, to feel its strength and softness. Your world has changed and, getting up, you make a promise: in return for this one blessed day of flight you will forever fight with all your will to bring the wild back all across our landscape — hedge by hedge and pond by pond — giving nature wings.