

What's That at Wheatfen?

Dick Meadows

It's around four in the afternoon at Wheatfen. It's the Eve of St. Agnes, January 20th, immortalised by John Keats in his poem of the same name: the owl, for all his feathers was a-cold/The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass/And silent was the flock in woolly fold.

Well, it's not freezing but the flock in the nearby fields are settling with the twilight. And close by Old Mill Marsh a barn owl is silently quartering the fen in a final search for food. You'd need to be very close to even hear her wing beat.

I can't think of anywhere else in the world I would rather be at this moment. It's a windy afternoon with the moon already peering through the fast moving clouds. The wind muffles the faraway drone of the A47 but occasionally the rather comforting rattle of the Norwich to Yarmouth train carries across the countryside.

Sally-Ann and I have walked here most weeks for five years and more. I have known Wheatfen for much longer but never so well. I'm no naturalist but when your wife is a wildlife film maker, then ignorance is overcome with the simple question, "What's that?" So now plants have names, trees become species and animals are no longer anonymous.

We're walking down Penguin Dyke. It's that time of year when the winter smell of decay is still strong but the landscape is already bursting with piled-up energy waiting to take off again like an athlete. This is my favourite place. I like the faint absurdity of the name (after the wherry Penguin) and the sense of solitude and secrecy in this dead-end track whose way is barred by Fen Channel.

Perhaps its selfishness, too, in enjoying a natural place not stifled by too many people or the overarching, school-masterly strictness of some of the big conservation bodies.

"What's that?" It's not the aircraft far above trailing its ragged vapour path and too high to hear. The noise is the conversation of rooks heading for nearby Buckenham and the biggest roost in Britain. Some estimates put the numbers well in excess of 50,000. There aren't too many birds above us but their chatter is as animated as a football crowd after a winning game. Wonder what they are saying. No wonder a gathering of rooks is called a parliament - just as noisy as their Westminster counterparts.

As the chatter and clatter of the birds subsides I'm reminded of Ted Ellis's unforgettable description of the Broads as a "breathing space for the cure of souls." Not sure about the soul but Wheatfen certainly calms a restless mind.

My memories of Ted are shorter than many people's but memorable still. When I joined the BBC in Norwich in the mid seventies he was a familiar figure in the newsroom, funny, kind and with a beguiling broadcasting style that made him a household name. When the BBC eventually decided to dispense with his wisdom and wit it was entirely their loss.

We've now walked across Eleven (new!) Bridges and turned right into Smee Loke for what we affectionately call the ring road route via the river. Maybe its superstition but we always walk anti-clockwise.

"What's that?" Its wigeon on the wing heading for some nearby dyke. Their call on the water always makes me smile. Sally's description is spot-on. They sound just like rubber ducks in the bath when you squeeze them and they squeak. I never tire of these paths. At this time of year David has hedged back the reeds in Smee Loke. Before long they will be on the march again skywards, squeezing the path almost into a tunnel.

The river is quiet, no speedboats and water skiers to wash away the tranquillity and the banks. But the river isn't empty and this time even I don't have to enquire, "what's that?" Bobbing on the tide are great crested grebe. We have a game, best of five, trying to guess where they will surface after each dive.

There's a momentary panic as Sally almost drops her battered but still exquisitely precious Carl Zeiss binoculars. They've been repaired at least twice before. Being married to a birder means I have to remember to refer to them as 'bins.' If it was a toss-up between me and the bins I wouldn't bet on it.

As we head back through Alder Carr Marsh, the magic of this magical place casts a final spell. There's a Chinese water deer on the path. We are downwind so she doesn't smell or see us. We stand and watch for several minutes. In our mad, careless world I can't help but think that sometimes we seem to know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Perhaps this little creature is a reminder that the value of Wheatfen is priceless