

Chapter 15

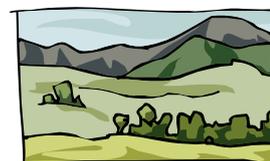
The following morning was busy for the two RSPCA Special Operations Agents. The camp had to be taken to pieces, gear packed into the vehicles, and the wood left as they found it. They quickly breakfasted on bacon and beans, followed by the inevitable mugs of coffee. Then the work began. It was always strange, Will thought, that the camp always seemed to take so much longer to dismantle and clear up than it did to erect it. After a final mug of coffee, they had to make 100% sure that the fire was out and harmless.



Once they'd packed up, they took one last walk through the wood. A pied flycatcher flitted around in the trees. A little further through the wood, the agents stopped. Ahead of them was a flock of tiny long-tailed tits. They always appeared to be busy, as they moved around in groups, searching, ever searching for food.

They emerged from the top end of the wood, and into a patch of high meadow. Here was a handful of lapwing, probing the turf for food. The high-pitched calls of a meadow pipit could be heard over the open grassland. Calling constantly, one of the tiny birds flew high above their heads, fanned out its wings and fluttered down in what the locals call its 'parachute display'.

Jason stopped and pointed across the meadow. The two men could see a couple of roe deer feeding. They stood still, hoping that the fact that the wind was in their favour might mean the deer didn't spot them until they'd had a good look.



After a few minutes, they moved on again, across the meadow to where they could see a stile in the dry stone wall. A clump of bare earth moved and turned into a hare. "Ben told me an amazing story the other day," said Will, suddenly, as they stood and watched the hare leap across the field. "It's a folk tale from these parts about a shape-shifting hare." The two men seated themselves on a stone wall and Will proceeded to repeat Ben's story to Jason.

"Well," he began, "the hare was the animal that no one dared name. Apparently, there were 77 names for hares back a few centuries ago - the 13th Century, I think he said. It seems that the hare was not well-liked, as it was feared by the people. A poem with the 77 names was written as a charm to protect hunters when they went out to catch a hare. It had to be said when the hunter first saw the hare, and, if it was said properly, it gave the hunter special powers to catch it."

"Why would a hunter need a magic charm against an animal as defenceless as a hare?" Jason asked.

"Ah, well," Will continued, "hares have an ancient mythology surrounding them, from all around the world, and, amazingly, lots of people still believe in its magical powers. Have you ever wondered why we have an Easter Bunny?"

Jason looked sideways at him. "Can't say I've ever given it much thought," he said.



"Well, the chocolate Easter bunny is the last remains of the ancient pagan belief in the Spring Hare, which laid eggs," Will told him.

"So the Easter Bunny is really a hare," Jason observed.



Continued below.

"Correct," Will continued. "The beliefs behind this come from way before Christian spring festivals. In Europe, many centuries ago, the goddess Eastre, the goddess of the dawn, was worshipped. Her servant was the hare - an animal spirit. Eastre brought the light at dawn and at the dawn of the new year, and hares carried it. When Christianity came along, we just adopted the timing of Eastre's festival."



"Oh, right. We did the same with Christmas, too," said Jason. "We used the old pagan Yule Ceremony - hence the Yule Log at Christmas."

"That's right," agreed Will. "We used the name of the pagan goddess Eastre for our Easter festival. There are loads of connections between spring, the New Year and fertility. These are all found in the symbols of the hare and the egg. Think about that when you're tucking into your Easter eggs this year."

"A lot of the magic around hares was to do with its ability to shape-shift," Will told him.

"Shape-shift?" said Jason.

"Yep! This is the ability of a human to change into an animal and back, of course, whenever they want to. They used to think that it was witches that did it when they were up to mischief! There are stories from all over Europe about shape-shifting, and they were pretty much believed until about a century ago."

"Most of them are pretty much the same - the spiteful witch who wants to do evil to her neighbours. If she changes into a hare, she cannot be caught by any ordinary ways of hunting. You needed a charm to allow you to overcome the witch's magic."

Ben told me about a local story. It comes from Easington, Castle Eden and Sedgfield, in the east of the county. Apparently, charmed hounds were able to chase and follow a hare. It made a mad dash for the home of an old woman. Just as it was about to escape through a hole in the door, one of the hounds managed to grab it and wound it. The hunters managed to open the door, but you'll never guess what they found - an exhausted and injured old woman! The witch had turned back from the hare into her human form!"



"Wow!" said Jason. "Some story!"

"I think a lot of these stories came from prehistoric religions, when hunters dressed up in animal skins and imitated animals. They reckoned it gave them more powers to hunt the animals."

"Yeah," said Jason, thoughtfully. "And if you think about the ancient pagan worship of the Moon, with the hare as the servant of the Moon Goddess, and I guess you have a pretty powerful body of magic, legend and myth. I guess it made the hunters fear the hare and you can see why they were afraid to say its name. He'd need a charm to hunt an animal like that!"



"There's a wheatear," said Jason, "The dry-stone wall bird."





The story told, the two men started off again to climb into the moorland above them. Most of the North Pennines moors are edged by grass pasture. There are lots of small springs and streams which provide wetland habitat, with vegetation like Sphagnum moss and rushes. It makes it ideal for ground nesting birds, and no area of England has as many of these birds. It is a truly magical area.

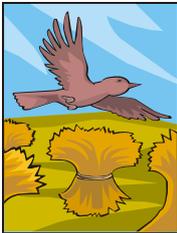


"Do you know what my favourite thing about these places is?" asked Jason, suddenly.

"Go on," said Will.

"The sound of the skylark," Jason replied.

"Yep, takes a bit of beating," Will allowed.



"I think it's that trickle of song from a bird that's so high up above you that does it. Mind you, they're not as common as they used to be. It's just another bird that has gone down-hill rapidly in this country. It used to be a common farm bird. I gather there's a decent population up here though. It's because of the traditional way the farms are run, I guess. A lovely sound on a summer's day!" Jason declared.

"Can't argue with that," his partner agreed, as they began to climb higher.

For much of the year the blanket bog and heather moorland of the high moors and summit plateaux of the North Pennines are bleak and windswept places.



During the springtime, the two men knew, the resident birds, such as red grouse, are joined by many others, making the high moors alive with songs and displays. The two wondered if they'd see the elusive dunlin. These tiny wading birds nest only on the highest moorland plains, as they like to breed in the blanket bogs which are found there. They can find insects and other invertebrates in the small pools in the peat, to feed to hungry chicks.



There might be golden plover too. They like the blanket bog areas, but can also be seen in the areas of drier heather. The two would know if they strayed too near to a nest, as they'd hear the flutey peeping alarm calls above the quiet of the hills. It is a beautiful bird, with a black face and breast, and a golden spattered back. A bird that the two men would really love to see in its natural habitat.

On and on they tramped, making their way slowly to the top of the moorland ridge. They marvelled at the beautiful scenery as it dropped below them into the valley.

The two men looked up as something moved in the corner of their eyes. A large bird of prey was soaring above the moorland. They immediately recognised the impressive sight of



buzzard. These magnificent birds were missing from the area for many years, but are now making a return to their old hunting grounds.

“You know, it was pesticides that got rid of many of our birds of prey,” said Will. The smaller birds and other prey ate corn covered in chemicals. The birds of prey ate them, and the poisons built up in their bodies. Didn’t always kill them, but it made their egg shells thin. They couldn’t raise chicks.”

“Yeah, we’ve got a lot to answer for,” Jason replied. “But I gather other predators, like sparrowhawks are bouncing back too.”

“I’d have thought there’d be enough Hawks around here, without more coming back,” Will teased.

“Funny!” Jason laughed. “But I’ll bet Chav and Yob have seen enough Hawks for a while!” The two men chuckled at the thought of the two teenagers when they were arrested.



Once at the top of the moorland ridge, they stopped and sat down on a large boulder. They looked out over beautiful Weardale. They could imagine it later in the year, when the heather was truly glowing purple across the hills.

“Remind me again,” said Will. “What is it about this job that I love?”



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