



# MYSTIC MARSHES

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*An ancient reserve on the banks of the Thames  
is home for thousands of migratory birds and  
a whole lot more besides. Words by Lucy Scott*

*Illustration by Abi Heyneke*

Why the birds had swept up into the skies was a mystery. Skies that had, until that moment of panic, been empty and blue except for one smudge of cloud and the bleached smoke billows from factory chimneys far across the marshes.

Organised at first, the lapwings moved together in tact, as a creature in its own right. Like a sea serpent shifting its body one way, and then the other, before dissolving into chaotic black fragments around a flock of starlings. Lined along the boardwalk we followed their wavering flight down with our binoculars. And I caught a glimpse of the Shard in the distance, hazy in the pale winter sun.

A bird of prey was one theory, though if it ever was in our sights it was nowhere to be seen now. But Rainham Marshes is like that: a landscape of unseen but felt presences. The Cetti's warblers chatting, down deep in the reeds. The shoveler ducks sifting for microscopic plankton on the water's surface. The gales

that helped carry thousands of birds to this place on their flight from Scandinavia over the North Sea. The water voles, torpid in their ditch burrows. Then the reeds, which entered my field of vision wherever I looked, that harbour stowaway moth caterpillars, as snug as babies in fleecy blankets.

I have joined the regular guided bird-watching tour of this RSPB reserve, just west of the Dartford Tunnel, at a busy time of year. Its November and hundreds of migratory birds are arriving here by the day. To my untrained eye, the lapwings that filled these expansive skies just a moment ago seemed enough to fill a small continent. But our guide Pat – a dedicated volunteer on site, who has a Bill Oddie brand of enthusiasm about him – tells me that 6,000 of them will settle here this winter. Black-tailed godwits, widgeons, skylarks and short-ear owls from Iceland, Russia and Scandinavia will escape here too.

And what a unique escape it is, for both the birds

and Londoners. One of the few remaining ancient landscapes left in the city, these medieval marshes are today a 1,000 acres of protected grazing habitat; an extensive field of long and short grasses netted with ditches and a reservoir that runs alongside the Thames for a couple of miles. Its appearance, save for the A13 and rail lines that embrace it, is how it has been since a sea wall was built 500 years ago to manage the Thames's tide, changing salt marsh to a wet marsh grassland. 'When you have grass, you can feed your beasts,' says Pat. 'Hundreds of years' ago, this land had a premium value for farmers, who would stop here to feed up their cattle before making the day-long journey to Smithfield Market.'

As we set off towards the reservoir, Pat points to what he calls the reserve's 'biological lawnmowers' over in the distance. Livestock grazing is vital to maintaining species-rich habitats like this, controlling aggressive species and preventing scrub encroachment.

Rainham's lapwings, creatures of wetlands with short vegetation, are happy beneficiaries. 'They don't like the grass to be too short as their chicks are too exposed, or too long as they get too wet in the morning dew,' says Pat.

It's a fine balance for nature that has been secured in the handful of years that the RSPB has owned the site. Until the eighties, the reserve was owned by the Ministry of Defence, which had used it as a military firing range and store for explosives for over 100 years. Testament to the site's history, the organisation had a long 15-year battle for ownership. Universal Studios had designs to redevelop the site into an amusement park ('Thorpe Park II,' as Pat terms it). But the then mayor Ken Livingstone joined the fight to save the space from diggers. 'Fortunately we had politics on our side,' he says.

We settle behind some reeds with our binoculars, metres from the reservoir. As Pat adjusts his scope on





a small flock of dunlin at the water's edge, a Eurostar clatters past, its carriages smeared with the smog of a thousand journeys. 'Are the birds bothered by the noises?' I ask. 'We have rail, road and ships nearby and we're close to City Airport too. But being such a large reserve, it is big enough for them not to be worried,' says Pat.

Looking out across the water suggests as much. The pond is a world apart from its edgelands. Snipe skulk in the marshy fringes, dabbling their pencil-like bills about. Pochard, widgeon and shelduck, mingle like fairground bumper cars. Their only concern appears to be the bulky cacophony of fuss being created by a flock of greylag geese that have just settled on the water.

Pat fixes on a pair of teal, sleeping. 'See the male, with his chestnut coloured head and green eye patches? If you look in your paintbox you'll see there's a colour green named after him.' This isn't the first time I've

noticed males appear to get all the luck in the plumage department; a pair of chaffinches we caught sight of earlier consisted of the splendid pinky grey male and the female, a pale brown and yellow. 'The forces of evolution have done strange things,' says Pat. 'Females choose a mate, and therefore male plumage has got more extraordinary. The plumage shows the males are healthy, they're hormones are working, and that they know where there's good food. What more does a woman want?' says Pat with a grin.

There is no shortage of reminders of Rainham's military past. Traces of its history remain, albeit obscured by reeds and vegetation; crumbling target ranges are now the preserve of moss and birds, and the ridges of grass across the site, where rifleman practiced, now serve to separate the landscape into distinct habitats. But the migratory species that have made the journey here this winter were here as German Second World War bombers scoped the site

on their way up the water to the city, and they were probably here before that. A history reflected in the soundscape; factories echoes around us in muffled explosions, mingling with the warbles and calls of birds.

But in the old explosives store, a concrete coliseum – adorned inside and out with lichen-covered elder, ivy, buddleia and brambles – nature has fully taken its own course. We stand before the entrance, where a thick arch of ivy has expertly clambered its way up and around. 'This area is a nice bit of scrub with a variety of bushes that feed birds through the year. They flower in sequence, which is very helpful. Elder and brambles produce the soft fruits of autumn, and then come the sloes and the hawthorn berries, which are the early winter fruit. Then, you get masses of ivy, which is in flower now.'

He lifts an inconspicuous pale yellow ivy flower corymb to show me. 'Great for wildlife,' he enthuses.

'It attracts bugs, even in November. Then the berries will be ready in a couple of months, when other foods are in short supply.' A cloud of bugs suspended nearby looks ready to hone in after we've made tracks. 'Its sheltered position means it is warmer than other bits of the reserve and vegetation grows really well. Spring starts a fortnight earlier and goes on a bit longer, which helps some of our winter species.'

We head back out to the reservoir, where the sun is lower now. Positioning ourselves along the boardwalk, the creamy light that's washing over the reserve is throwing the birds into shadow, making it hard to distinguish one species from the next. The reflections of two stripes of plane exhaust fumes appear in a cross on the surface of the water. A flock of dunlin rises up, swishing one way and then the other, flashing white then grey like a shoal of fish in the ocean.

'Now you see me, now you don't,' says Pat, marveling at their shimmering display.