The Ornithology of *Tarka the Otter*

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Bibliography: *The Birds of Devon*, D'Urban and Mathew, 2nd Ed., 1895. *Victoria County History of the County of Devon* (bird section), D'Urban, 1906. *Braunton, a Few Nature Notes*, Rev. Ed., Dr Elliston Wright, 1932. *The Birds of Devon*, Robert Moore, 1969.

I suppose I must have read *Tarka* almost as many times as Henry Williamson claimed to have rewritten it. It is a remarkable story, wonderfully told and both delightful and sorrowful to read. Often, as I pause to think over some particularly vivid scene or other, I hear Williamson's soft voice saying '. . . every word chipped out of the breast bone.' It is a hallmark of his writing that the scenes we are presented with, whether in Lewisham or the Taw and Torridge estuary, should be meticulously described. In *Tarka* this applies to an almost microscopic degree and one only has to look as far as the first page for an example; 'the seedling oak crushed by a bullock's hoof causing the tree to grow crooked', etc. But much of the book's beauty is also derived from the wealth of birds and plants which are mentioned, not in any random way but carefully chosen to enhance the colour of the scene he is recreating. As a bird lover myself I have always been intrigued by this knowledge and eventually I decided to find out if references to various rarities were mere literary licence or if indeed had any basis in fact.

Just for the record there are eighty-one species of bird mentioned in *Tarka*! Many of them, of course, are quite common, others were more common at the time of writing, some are rare and a few are rare to the point of disbelief. The first bird in the book is the Heron, Old Nog to most of us, and this is soon followed by the revered Barn Owl now, tragically, in serious decline all over Great Britain. The early chapters are full of birds mostly busy with their young as Tarka's mother is with hers. It is on Tarka's first adventure, when he chases the moon's reflection across the river, that we meet two uncommon birds. First the Nightjar, a summer visitor and inhabitant of heaths, commons and open woodlands and, almost immediately, the Short-eared Owl which seems oddly out of place in a river valley in early summer. In the 'VCH' the Nightjar was stated to be 'very numerous in suitable localities'. As regards the Short-eared Owl Moore says it is a regular winter visitor and has on occasion bred, interestingly, always near Braunton. But I do wonder if Williamson in fact meant the Long-eared Owl because he mentions the raised eartufts which in the Short-eared are practically invisible, in addition to which it is almost wholly diurnal.

Following this we have various birds including Grey Wagtail, Chiffchaff, Turtle Dove and Tree Creeper, the last of which is described with perfect accuracy (p. 38 1st Ill. ed.). Two pages later the subtitle is Corncrake Meadow. The Corncrake, which Williamson calls the Landrail, has now vanished as a breeding species from mainland Britain. Williamson might well have mourned the loss of this bird when he made the film 'The Vanishing Hedgerows' because it is entirely due to modern farming methods that the Corncrake has disappeared. It is now only found in parts of Ireland and the Hebrides where traditional farming practices still persist. D'Urban stated that the Corncrake was plentiful and common on the hill farms of North Devon but by the 1920s it was in decline and the last breeding record was in 1938. There can be no doubt, however, that Williamson would have come across this bird on his walks at night for that is when it is most likely to be heard.

The history of the Raven is a happier one altogether. It is a bird as familiar in Williamson's books as Old Nog; Kronk the Raven who had three hundred sons. There is a very charming episode later in the book where Tarka is adult and travelling over Exmoor. He lives for a few days by a tarn, Pinkworthy near Challacombe, where he has a game with a Raven who drops sticks for Tarka to retrieve. In the nineteenth century the Raven was severely persecuted and by 1900 was described as scarce. However, the situation has improved dramatically for during the 1960s it was reported to have nested in two-thirds of all the 10 km squares in the county.

In Chapter Six when Tarka, his mother, Greymuzzle and White-tip are travelling down to the estuary a Redthroated Diver is casually listed among the victims of water bailiffs who nail the corpses of fish-eating birds to an old oak tree. Although its breeding grounds are no further south than Scotland the Redthroated Diver can be seen off our southern coasts in Autumn and Winter and, on consulting Moore, I found that the Taw and Torridge Estuary is the only locality in North Devon where it is regularly seen. As winter approaches Tarka is taken by Greymuzzle to 'a warm sleeping place in a clump of round headed rush, near the day-hide of a Bittern'. This is another rare species and D'Urban in the 'VCH' summarised its status as 'a Winter visitor of rather irregular appearance, coming in flights at long intervals'. Moore states that 'during the past forty years it has been reported on about fifty occasions, mostly during cold spells, and that five of these were from Braunton Marshes'. Perhaps it was more common in the early years of this century but it seems that Williamson was on reasonably firm ground here.

Another bird strongly associated with Williamson's writing is the Peregrine and here again is a dismal tale. The ancient eyries of Lundy, Morte Point and Baggy have long since gone. The first lethal blow was delivered by the Air Ministry during the war when many of these magnificent falcons were killed because they presented a threat to carrier pigeons. The end came with the use of toxic chemicals on farm land which found their way through the food chain to the Peregrine causing eggs to be infertile or to have fragile shells. By 1961 only one pair was known to have bred in Devon but since then, with the banning of DDT, there has been some slight improvement.

Chapters Nine and Ten deal with winter when Tarka and Greymuzzle are in the estuary. This section contains some of the most powerful and effective writing in the book, with the exception perhaps of the final chapter. It is harrowing for the reader who is spared nothing by the descriptions of the death of Marland Jimmy, the plight of Greymuzzle's cub and the perfunctory way in which Greymuzzle herself is killed. Even the death of the swan, without which the otters would starve, is deeply moving and one imagines, too subjectively I am sure, how the swan feels hearing 'its brethren beating out the flying song of swans' as it lies dying in the icy water. Numerous snippets of detail build up to give a picture of a fiercesomely cold winter and the introduction of arctic birds serves to heighten the effect considerably. Of course, as regards the art of writing, it is irrelevant whether the Snowy Owl, the Greenland Falcon, White-fronted Goose and Wild Swan really ever occurred in Devon and yet there is always a fascination with Williamson's writing in separating fact from fiction.

It seemed to me rather startling to read of the thickset bird which had arrived 'from a frozen land where the Northern Lights stared in stark perpetuity upon the ice-fields'. The Snowy Owl certainly does inhabit the highest terrestrial latitudes, breeding as it does on the tundras of Lapland and Northern Russia, although there was the freakish series of years from 1967–75 when a pair bred in the Shetland Isles. I could discover nothing however which would substantiate the *Tarka* bird except one instance recorded by D'Urban of a Snowy Owl trapped on Exmoor in 1876 which was subsequently taken to Barnstaple for preservation. It is interesting to note though that Williamson tells of a stuffed specimen in Mary Ogilvie's house in *The Pathway*. There is also a record for 1947; clearly this is too late for *Tarka* but it does show that the presence of this bird was not impossible.

The arrival of the Greenland Falcon is equally surprising but Moore states that 'of the three races of the Gyr falcon occurring in Europe only the migratory Greenland falcon has reached Devon, where some six examples have been obtained or seen during the past 150 years'. More interestingly, Dr Elliston Wright records that one was taken in a rabbit trap on Braunton Burrows in 1925. I cannot imagine that this ornithological excitement escaped Williamson's notice!

The question of the wild swan is more complicated as there are two European species which may occur in winter; namely the Bewick's and the Whooper and, in *Tarka*, Williamson does not differentiate. In *The Pathway*, however, he does so where, on page 71 of the 1928 edition, he writes that 'eight Whooper Swans, visitants from Arctic seas, had risen from the Ram's Horn duck pond'. D'Urban stated regarding the Whooper Swan that he considered it rarer than the Bewick's, only occurring in severe weather but that a party of five turned up at Braunton Marsh in 1905.

The White-fronted Geese which come with 'hound-like baying . . .' '. . . before the blizzard howling its way from the North Star' are indeed a portent of exceptionally cold weather. Moore says that of the five species of grey geese the White-fronted is the only one that occurs at all regularly in Devon. It occurs principally in hard winters, the numbers increasing with the severity of the weather, and the Taw and Torridge estuary is one of their haunts. Other winter visitors mentioned here are Snow Bunting and Sanderling. The former are sometimes called Snowflakes because of their peculiar bobbing and drifting flight and are regular migrants to Northam and Braunton Burrows. The Sanderling, a small wader, has the habit of running with great rapidity forwards and backwards with the waves when looking for food. It is found in the Taw and Torridge estuary and especially on Saunton Sands. It is a certainty that Williamson would have observed these birds himself.

In Chapter Ten Tarka travels alone up on to Dartmoor and it is with relief, as always, that spring has come. The horrors of the winter are forgotten by Tarka as he explores the source of the Taw. A new range of birds are brought to our attention including Snipe, Dipper, Meadow Pipit and Wheatear. These are all fairly common moorland birds but as always the descriptions of their behaviour are faithfully and accurately recorded, particularly that of the Pipit (page 140 1st Ill. Ed.). On the next page Tarka is at Cranmere Pool when 'a bird passed swiftly over his head gliding on down-curved wings and crying go-beck! go-beck! go-beck!'. This is the Red Grouse which Williamson points out is one of the few which lived and bred on the moor. Normally associated with the Scottish hills this bird was, in fact, introduced to Dartmoor somewhere around 1915. A similar experiment was made on Exmoor in 1820 which failed but a second attempt in 1916 was successful and Moore states that the Red Grouse is present today on both moors although rather thinly distributed.

On Tarka's second moorland journey, this time over the Chains of Exmoor, Williamson describes a Blackcock and Greyhen with young. This is the much rarer cousin of the preceding species. It may be chance that he mentions this bird here and not on Dartmoor but I suspect that he knew Exmoor was, and indeed still is, the last stronghold of the Black Grouse in Devon. D'Urban writes that it had been declining since the beginning of the nineteenth century and I know from a recent visit that they can, with luck, be found in the vicinity of Dunkery Beacon although that is just in Somerset.

From Exmoor we come to the first major hunt scene on the River Lyn and we are given a hint of things to come when Tarka tries to drown the hound Deadlock in the sea below Lynmouth. At this stage the story is dotted with disturbing images; for example the drowned otter caught in a gin whilst playing under a waterfall. These seem to occur rather shockingly and without warning in the otherwise tranquil passage describing Tarka's happy journey trailing White-tip round the North Devon coast. The stag and hounds which suddenly come hurtling over the cliff to smash on the rocks below and the lobster gorged on its meal of ottercub which could not escape from the wicker pot are two more examples which come to mind.

There is one chapter left before the final hunt and in this Williamson deals quickly with the courtship of Tarka and White-tip, their cubs and Tarquol's young life. At the beginning, where the two otters are hunting salmon at Beam Weir, there is, in the pool above, a Great Northern Diver looking for trout. It struck me as odd to find this bird so far up a river. Like the Red-throated Diver it is a winter visitor to southern coastal waters but differing in that its breeding quarters are in the High Arctic. The county avifaunas say this bird is a regular visitor although less common in the Taw and Torridge estuary than on the South Coast. However, it was with some satisfaction that I discovered in Moore a specific note that it sometimes travels up rivers for several miles and has been seen at Bishops Tawton for example.

Only one bird worthy of mention remains in Tarka and that is the Red-backed Shrike. This is yet another species which has all but disappeared from Britain as a breeding species. At the turn of the century it was quite common and no one knows precisely the cause of this decline although some have suggested that it is due to gradual climactic change. This bird turns up during the final hunt scene in which very few other birds appear and this applies particularly to the last two chapters. This is not surprising as details of that sort would interfere with the flow and pace of the book as it moves towards its devastating conclusion. However, it may be significant that this solitary avian intrusion, often known as the Butcher Bird because of its habit of impaling its prey on thorns, is described seconds before the hounds find Tarquol and kill him.

Strictly speaking the following has no place here but I feel it is important and revealing. I have already drawn attention to *The Pathway* which also contains much on ornithology including the cases of stuffed birds at Wildernesse, the home of Mary Ogilvie. Amongst these are many rarities and one is the Great Bustard which, as Mary tells Maddison was 'shot by my grandfather in 1870, one of a flock of eight that flew here in another hard Winter. Boys sliding on the ice thought they were wild Turkeys and flung stones at them; and the whole parish went out after them with guns'. Formerly this bird bred in the British Isles, mainly in East Anglia and on Salisbury Plain, the last record being in Suffolk in 1832. Today the nearest population is in Spain. As Mary Ogilvie infers, the Great Bustard is an enormous bird weighing up to 35 lbs, standing about 3'6" tall and with a wingspan of nearly eight feet; one that would be hard to mistake. The following is an extract from D'Urban.

> *Towards the end of 1870 this country was visited by a small migration of Great Bustards from the continent and specimens were procured in many districts. In North Devon a flock of seven or eight was observed in a field at Croyde where two were shot. The survivors then flew a little distance to the South, alighting in a field on the boundary of the two parishes of Westdown and Braunton, where Mr Wells, of West Down, fired at them and wounded one of them, which was afterwards secured. The flock, from which three had now been taken, next settled close to the small town of Braunton, near some boys who were sliding on the ice, who at once began to pelt them with stones, upon which the birds flew off and were seen no more.*

My immediate thought having read this was that Williamson must have possessed a copy of D'Urban or at least had access to one. Alternatively he may have heard the tale of the Bustards in one of the village pubs. There is, however, a fifty-year gap between the sighting and Williamson's arrival in Devon which makes this rather unlikely unless of course, he talked to one of the boys who had been on the ice! But however he knew about these things it is more to the point to realise that in *Tarka*, as in so much of his writing, Williamson, it would seem, kept close to historical facts.

Wild Swans off the Crow Neck, with White House in background