

A WINTERS TALE

By Mary Soyka

Much is now written and spoken about wildlife gardening, but perhaps it is necessary to first become aware of, and enjoy the wildlife in and around an ordinary garden, and actually see what is there. It is no use putting up woodpecker boxes where there are no woodpeckers.

Here in beautiful Sutherland, where winter is heralded by long skeins of greylag geese flying joyously in from their summer quarters further north, to graze in the fields here, and the flocks of redwings and fieldfares arriving to gorge themselves on rowan berries. Spring is similarly summoned by the excited chatter and cries of the geese, as they gather once again to head north to their breeding grounds.

In the winter, of course, the nights are very long, and the birds need all the help they can get to survive the length of it, when food is in short supply. It is then that many birds can be attracted to the garden. Often I feel that they are eating us out of house and home and that I go out to work merely to feed them. We have two bird tables, twelve nut feeders, four seed feeders and also feed extensively on the ground. Everybody's favourite is a bird pudding made of melted fat, with seed, currants, oats and oatmeal mixed in, and many birds get hooked on it, not least of all the local pheasants. These are reared by the local estate, and are generally not harassed by other birds, but are in danger during the dreaded shooting season, and continually from the busy A9 just outside here. Their road sense is nonexistent, and sadly many of them are now buried under rose bushes or trees in our garden. The only birds that harass them are a

pair of herring gulls that have taken over our roof. I have seen them pick up a pheasant, and throw it out of the way, and was just about to go out and interfere, when another pheasant rushed up, fluffed up to twice its size, and leapt up to give the gull a good peck in the eye, which sent it flying off in a flurry.

You naturally get fond of the regulars, and at the moment, we have one rather pleasant old cock pheasant, who is tail-less and nick-named "Big Ears", on account of his large green ear tufts, who clucks like a hen when he finds some delicacy, and likes to gather all the other birds to share it. At the other extreme is "Groucho", a beautiful dark pheasant, who runs at the little birds, scattering them, and pecks at and fights with all the other pheasants. The pre-fight display consists of fluffing out and ducking, which looks like repeated bowing. A week or two ago, I was continually woken in the morning, by him fighting with someone, and he began to bow and threaten me as I pulled back the curtains. I explained in no uncertain terms my feelings on the matter, shaking my fist, but was at a disadvantage, having just crawled out of bed, and being arrayed only in a nightie.

We have dozens and dozens of ubiquitous but beautiful chaffinches, occasionally accompanied by bramblings, amusing us with their antics, but which fight pugnaciously. Some of the chaffinches have a disorder, having one huge foot which seems to trouble them.

We have one pair of bullfinches, after which the chaffinches seem quite dull in colour. I suppose they take some buds, but to my mind,



SPINNINGDALE NURSERIES

Your local nursery for :

CONIFERS
HEATHERS
ALPINES
SHRUBS

Roses, Hedging, Trees, Compost, Grow-bags

Telephone : (086 288) 263



more than make up for it with the pleasure of seeing them. We have many tits, particularly coal tits, which appear out of the nearby conifer plantation. This winter there was quite a lot of felling locally, and I was on the point of writing to the Forestry Commission, demanding a nut allowance, as many more birds came pouring out, and all our nut feeders were emptied daily. Towards the end of the winter the little green siskins appear in great numbers to feast on the nuts, and make a great fuss when nut feeding finishes. This year although vigilant, we did not know breeding had started, and lost two baby greenfinches, who got peanuts out of the mixed seed. All nuts were immediately removed, and the little siskins were trying to follow the nuts into the house.

All the little birds are continually under threat from the rampageous sparrow hawks here. They come swooping in, as if from nowhere, scattering everyone, and often perch on the bird tables, but often secure their prey off the feeders. I used to have five of the nut feeders on the house, and it was lovely to watch them covering the house, on the feeders or awaiting their turn ; to my mind, much more beautiful than the summer hanging baskets, but had to move them into the bushes, where there is more cover, after one day when I saw five little ones taken, and could stand it no more. I was having my lunch that day, when I heard tremendous continual screaming, and rushed out to find who was being murdered, and just outside the gate was a blackbird pinned to the ground by one of the blue-grey terrors. The occasional hen-harrier visits, and causes just

as much terror, but always stops me in my tracks to gaze at it, to my mind not as cruel looking as the sparrow hawks. I suppose the appearance of the raptors are a healthy sign. The only other regularly seen birds of prey are buzzards, which generally only come when it has been snowy for a few days. I am sure that some of the buzzards no longer kill, but live off rabbits and other carrion, killed on the road. Last winter after several continually snowy days, when any traffic merely crawled about, and I was grounded for the day, I watched a weak buzzard tossing about a chicken bone, from the carcass I had given them to pick, from the previous weekend., until I could stand it no longer, raided the fridge to give up one of our two lamb steaks for tea. He fell upon it, and fed among the other birds, pheasants, chaffinches etc., feeding quite happily within a foot of him, apart from one blackbird who continually divebombed him to which he merely ducked. Then I noticed that he kept looking up into a nearby larch, and following his gaze, shrieked "Oh no", as the larger paler female sat there watching. I surrendered the other lamb steak, which she immediately took, and it was bread-and-scraps for tea.

We have four or five garden robins, who seem continually battling for territory. One will occasionally get friendly, asking for worms, particularly when we're digging a new patch, but will consume several, and suddenly there is a flash, knocking him off balance, and a tremendous battle off across the garden, between the two disputants.

Of nocturnal birds, there are bats that hang up in our sheds, and tawny owls that hoot and call almost continuously all night at different times of the year. One winter evening I was sitting cosily by the fire, minding my own business, when the most eerie sounds began echoing round the room, and after a minute or two of stunned shock I realised an owl was hooting down the chimney. I crept out of the back door, mainly to confirm that I was'nt being invaded by ghosts, to see him sitting on the chimney pot, until he saw me, and glided noiselessly away.

The owls and weasels too, feed mainly on the many wood mice that live in and around the garden. I quite like to see them scuttling about. We have a gang that live in the stone wall near the front door. I see one of them has made a canny hole right under a seed feeder, where the seed falls, breakfast in bed? They don't come in the house, as long as I remember to Hoover up every day, so no attractive bits are left around the floor. We've just had one in once, that stayed for three days before making

off again. They sneak out at night, and run along the branches for a crafty feed on the nut feeders, and I'm not too pleased if I put my hand on one while refilling the feeders in the dark. I was also not so keen on them when I sent for one hundred *Anemone blanda* White Splendour, and duly planted groups of them all over the garden. By next morning there were about six left, and next spring my bulbs were blooming all over the wood behind the garden where they had stored up and forgotten them. Some were replanted in strange places in the garden, so perhaps they didn't like my planting schemes? The next week I tried some crocus bulbs with a prickly holly leaf buried over each one, but these were merely flung aside. I've now found that if I plant up hanging containers with winter flowering heathers, and early spring bulbs, using them as winter flowering baskets, then replant the bulbs still with leaves into the garden, they are not touched. The heathers also bring bumble bees all around the front door, where they can be studied at eye level. This garden is full of bumble bees which I love to see. They



must live either in the shed, the old stone walls, or else out of the garden, as we've never found a nest in the compost heap, or turf piles. We've grown a small sheet of the winter flowering Springwood White for them, which they cover on sunny days, and from then on, they feed on flowers of spring bulbs, Mahonias, Pulmonarias and then on into the summer flowers, of which they particularly seem to like the mallows, and foxgloves. I could watch them for hours, disappearing up the individual tubular flowers.

Of the other insects, so far we seem to have few butterflies as yet, mainly a few small whites, and a few small tortoiseshells and peacocks. The first year we were here, four years ago, was a bumper year for wasps; their intricate nests hanging everywhere, in the large beech tree behind, in the forestry's plantation, as well as underground. Our wooden cold frames were alive with them, as they scratched shavings off to make their nests, and it was necessary to take care not to put a hand on one. I was most worried for our dogs, but no-one got stung. Since then we have just had one or two nests in the garden.

We do of course, have the famous Scottish midges by the million, and during the summer evenings have frequently to retreat to our shed for a reviving cuppa, and to re-smother ourselves with insect repellent, and sit surrounded by candles and insense stricks, which nearly suffocate me, but at least also offend the wee beasties.

Slugs we have by the bucketful. Why do they always go for something precious? They don't touch the wild violets, but invariably make for two precious ones, *Coeur d'Alsace*, and *Rawson's White*, from the now sadly late Mary Mottram in Devon, and have to be picked off night and morning, each year they mangled our lovely *Ramonda myconi* before it has opened. I'm afraid I am not kind, and always

hurl them as far as I can out of the garden. I suppose you couldn't do this if you had neighbours, as it would be asking for a black eye. People always tell me they walk back, and my reply is invariably "Ah bit it takes them a long time". The birds don't seem to care for them, and our only hope is the many toads we have, which emerge at dusk. Their main enemy is our spaniel, who has an unequivocal hatred for them, and after killing one, is now let out at dusk and after, only on the lead.

There are lizards in the walls that are seen occasionally, and also plenty of moles that burrow along, but do not worry us. We have no grass lawn, but I suppose they'd make a mess if they got into our newly planted chamomile lawn. Normally it is only necessary to go round and press back anything they've burrowed under. I sometimes worry how many worms they're eating, but there seem to be plenty when we dig.



We have visits from roe deer, so far only when it snows, although we often hear them barking in the wood. They leave huge piles of droppings as their calling cards. Their dainty hoof marks are seen, and they seem to nibble down mainly herbaceous plants, which does no harm. Here it seems wise to leave on all herbaceous growth until the spring, as extra protection. If the red deer visit the garden, it is a different matter, and some people nearby have had to abandon their garden, as the red deer have taken it over, and they now have stag fights on their former lawn.

Rabbits are another matter. Around here are many black ones. They bark young trees, and I often wonder how different the countryside would look without rabbits. We are rabbit fenced but still have an occasional one in, if the gate is left open, after which of course it can't get out, so something has to be done, as

the damage one rabbit does is tremendous. So far we have always managed to catch them. People tell us you can't catch them, but this is not so. If you keep up a hot pursuit at dawn and dusk, they will usually end up throwing themselves at the fence in panic, whereupon they can be grabbed, usually screaming, and I tell them to shut up, before lifting them over. The last fellow we got was a wily one, who grew very fat, and we even fed him bought carrots and lettuce to reduce the damage. In desperation we sent off for a live trap, to be carrot baited, so we could release him elsewhere, but before it arrived he got myxy, and was a pathetic sight hopping round outside the garden being hand fed, until it got to a state where we felt he'd have to be put out of his misery, and were just sitting saying alternately "I can't do it" and "we'll have to", when he keeled over and died. Rabbits and gardens seem completely incompatible.

It seems to me that you have to look and see what is around in the way of wildlife, and think what they need, to attract them in, for all the wonderful enjoyment to be on your very doorstep, and use as few poisons and noxious sprays as you possibly can, that damage the whole chain of wildlife.

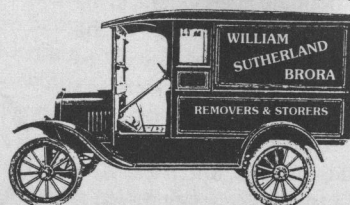
THE ARDGAY NEWSAGENTS

Would Like To Announce

◆ ◆ ◆
From 6th April
THEY WILL BE OPEN
EVERY THURSDAY TILL
8PM

**ADVERTISING
in
SUTHERLAND LIFE
can cost as little as
£13.00
Per Month
Phone (0862)810153
for details**

HAVE VAN WILL TRAVEL



- Nationwide Removal Service
- Regular Journeys South
- Storage Facilities Available
- Expert Packing
- Personal service

WILLIAM SUTHERLAND

Station Square, Brora.
Tel: (0408) 21229 for a free estimate

Mackay & Co.

CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS

Cathedral Square
Dornoch
Sutherland
IV25 3LP
(0862) 810756

Anvil House
Main Street
Golspie
Sutherland
KW10 6RA
(040 83) 3160

COMMUNITY NEWS

CARERS VOLUNTARY SITTER SERVICE

If you are looking after someone who is sick, handicapped or elderly and they require constant care thus preventing you from getting out and about to do shopping, keep a dental appointment or visit the hairdresser, perhaps the Carers Voluntary Sitter Service could be of help to you.

A team of volunteers throughout East Sutherland are available and a member can come to your home and sit with your loved one while you are out. Perhaps all you require is time-off to meet a friend, go for a walk or have a cup of coffee undisturbed. Time off can be arranged on a regular basis or for an occasional period.

To find out more about the scheme contact Alison Burnett at Pulrossie Farm, Dornoch or by telephoning 086 288 206. There is NO CHARGE for this service and any transport costs are met by the East Sutherland Council of Social Service. Your local doctor, nurse or minister should be aware of our service and you should feel confident to discuss this idea with any of these people.

I look forward to hearing from you, do please get in touch. This service is funded by a grant from Rural Initiative Scotland who fully approve of our aim and wish to see this service develop in East Sutherland.

Alison S. Burnett.

CLASHMORE EVENING OF GLAMOUR

The ladies of the Carnegie Hall, Clashmore will be presenting an evening of glamour and luxury on Thursday 27th April at 7.30pm.

A fashion show will be given by Options of Dornoch with colour consultancy by First Impressions, Perth. Floristry by Margaret of W.A. MacDonald and hair care by Rainbow. Beautiful homes by Briarhill Interiors and house plants by Spinningdale Nursery.

There will be a cake stall refreshments and a raffle. Admission will cost £2.50 and John Gordons bus will pick up on route from Embo.

The evening is open to ladies only.

WEST DRUMMUIE GARDEN

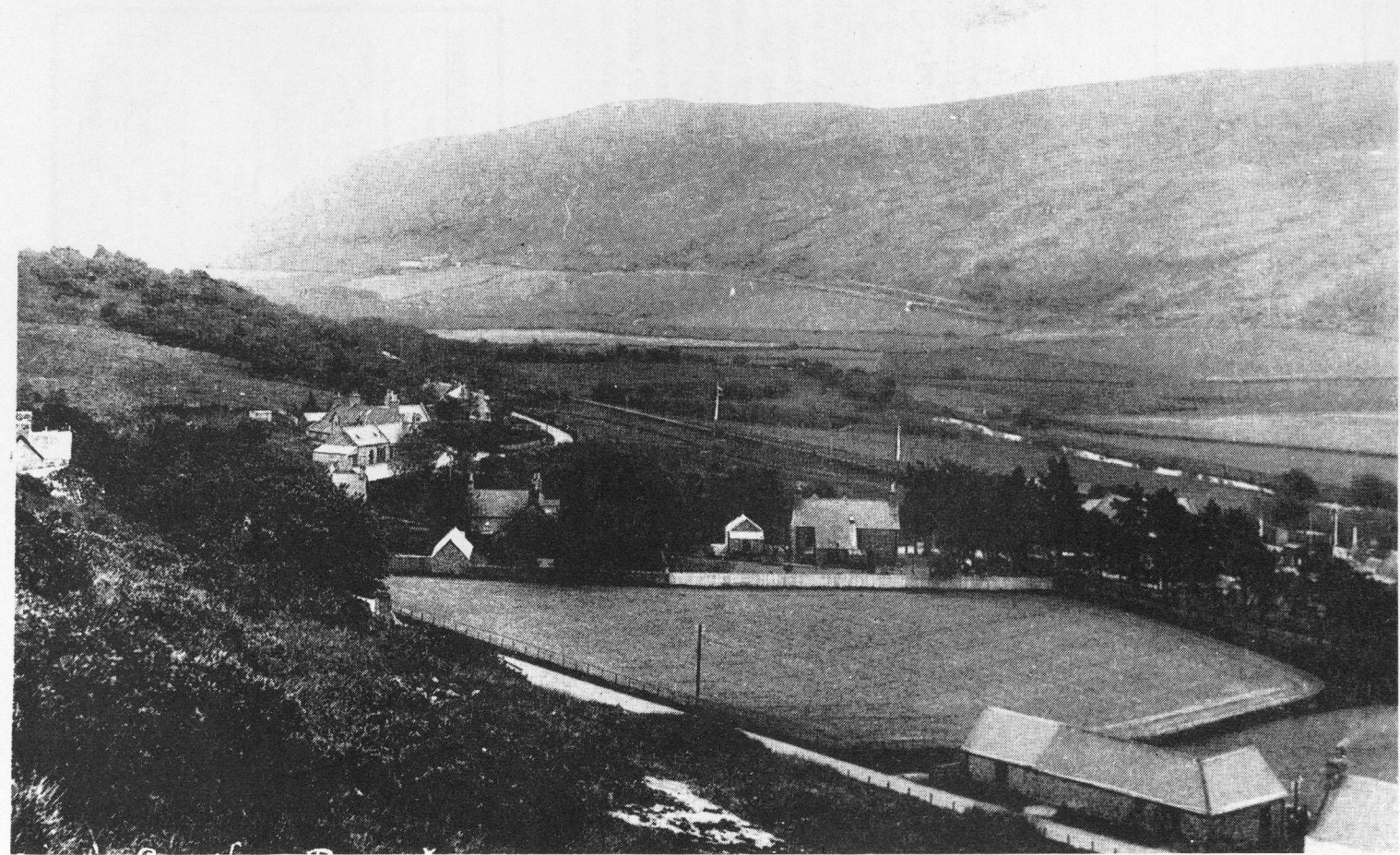
Golspie, Sutherland.

Open from Easter until the end of
September on Wednesdays or telephone
Golspie (040 83) 3493

HARDY PLANTS
Including
Meconopsis, Primulas,
Autumn Gentians, Geraniums,
Herbs and Shrubs.

The Garden is one mile south of
Golspie on the A9. Turn up the
hill by the white milestone, bear
right at the fork, it is the last house.

ALL PLANTS HOME GROWN



OLD ROGART

Our main photograph (left) shows a 1930s view of Rogart from the hill by the main road. To the left can be seen the Rogart Hotel which was built as a Post Office in 1845, the hotel was constructed from granite quarried at nearby Dalmore granite Quarry.

On the far right is the railway station which was opened to passengers on 13th April 1868 but is now sadly unmanned.

In the trees stand the meal mill and mill house and in the centre ground two Highland Railway Semaphore Signals.

The background shows the hills on the south side of Strath Fleet before forestry planting began.

The other two views are from approximately 1940 and show (top) the Muie area and bottom a general view to the

west of Rogart with Rovie Farm to the left and the road and railway together in the centre. All these views come from Post Cards posted in the area, it is interesting to note that the cost of sending a Post Card in 1930 was just 1d yet by 1944 the cost had doubled to 2d!

We will be publishing a number of old photographs of Sutherland over the next few months, if you have any of interest which have not previously been published please let us know. If you have a good story to go with them then all the better.

