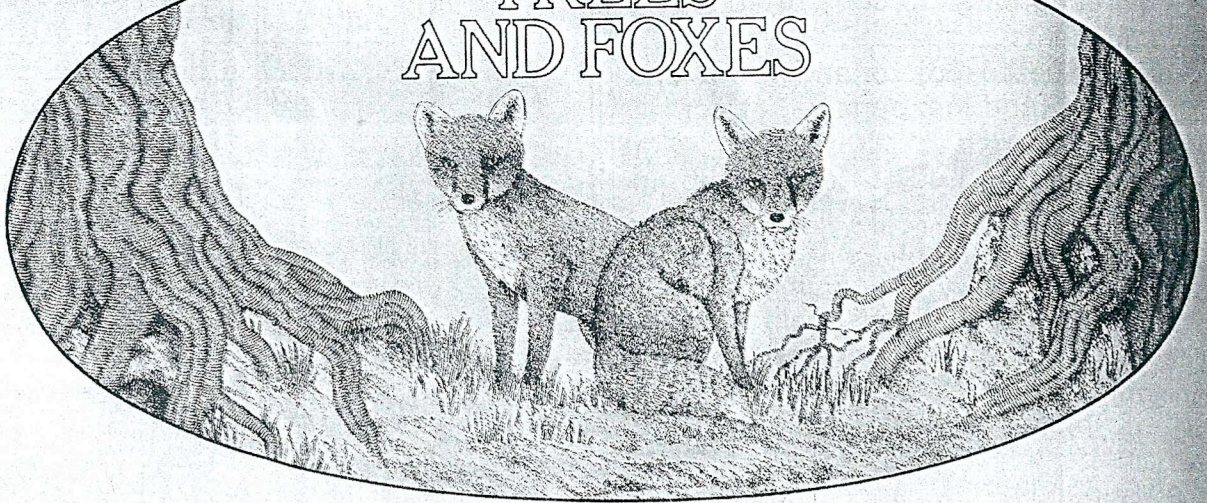


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A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

TREES
AND FOXES

Before he died, H.E. Bates gave permission for us to reprint favourite passages from some of his books. This excerpt is taken from 'Through the Woods', published by Victor Gollancz Ltd.

A wood at night, or even more at twilight, can be a strange place. Fear begins to come more quickly in a wood, with darkness and twilight, than in any other place I know. I have been in a wood gathering violets or primroses in the late evening, when a sudden realisation of twilight coming down has sent a sudden running of cold up my spine and I have half run out of the place.

That feeling is common. The path through our wood is public and is used a good deal by day. But there is precious little use of it by night, except by the local poacher. Other people will not use it. 'Damned if I'm much on that old wood at night.' 'Lumme if I ain't glad when I get out of that place.'

Why is this? It is not simply darkness. It can only be some quality in the trees themselves. They impinge on us, hypnotise us more or less by the new fantastic shape that darkness has given them.

At one period of my life I did much walking by night: long vigorous walks out of the town into the surrounding country. It was a country that was almost treeless but if I walked far enough I reached woods. Reaching them, I at once used to turn back. They had some powerful quality of darkness, some awful intimidating blackness that I could not face.

A field can be seen and understood and explored. Whereas in a wood the

wood is very much hidden by the trees: there are countless darknesses, unknown places. It is an exploration into the unknown. It is at once a joyful and fearful place.

Children are never frightened in fields, except by cows or by the hostile appearance of irate hats. But they are often frightened in woods: by the very mystery and seclusion of the place, by the sudden soft hushings of leaves, by the magnified echoes of feet, by the leaping up of rabbits, by the savage sudden screechings of unknown birds.

But if I have sometimes been glad to leave a wood I have oftener been sorry.

I sat once in a wood on the north border of Bedfordshire, in April, by a keeper's hut, eating an orange. It was perfect weather, quiet and sunny, with a little windy blowing about of the hazels. I had walked up the wood, along still ridings, seeing more primroses and also more oxlips, which are like wild polyanthus, than I had ever seen before or in fact than I have ever seen since. By the keeper's hut there was a biggish pool. Very still, over-shadowed by trees, it looked like a stretch of black glass. All over the place was a windy clapping and brushing of bare ash and hazel and, every time the wind turned, a great breath of primrose scent.

Suddenly there was an unexpected stirring about the pool; a flicker of brown, almost fawn, and then another and another. The first I took for a rabbit. Even about the second I had some doubt. After the third and fourth and fifth I had no doubt: they were young fox-cubs.

They came tumbling up out of the

holes in the pond-bank, in and out up and down, rolling over and over playing an endless game of chivvy with each other, until I could count thirteen. As a boy, I once held a lion-cub in my hands: he was a fawn gold and like plush, a wonderfully soft golden cat with a sleepy blinking face. Those fox-cubs playing in the woods were very like him: so many little fawny-gold cats playing with a kind of pretty devilry up and down the banks of the pool, running out into the primroses, doubling back, rolling each other over, their light fur all the time ruffled and rosetted by the light wind, until they seemed like the prettiest creatures in the world.

I sat there for a long time, watching them. The wind was just right, blowing from them to me, and they never suspected my presence. They were endlessly fascinating, tireless in their own devilries, lovely with their sun-coloured fawn and their grace of movement up and down that steep bank, on the edge of the water.

And finally I had only myself to blame for upsetting it all. Not satisfied I moved nearer, slowly and, as I thought, quite soundlessly. Getting much nearer, I stood still. I could see them better. They had still no suspicion of me. Then, in a moment, I moved on again. I made no sound but in a second they were all arrested electrically, in alarm. They stopped for a single second, cocked their heads and gave one look at me. In another moment they had gone tumbling down like golden balls into the dark holes, out of sight.

And I have never, by some damnable chance, seen a fox-cub since.

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