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ALL THE YEAR ROUND

Wood engravings by AGNES MILLER PARKER

Commentary by H. E. BATES



Staring at the fire and beyond the fire into the space of centuries, does the cat see the constancy of herself through thousands of years? She is the only wild animal that is tame, the only tame one that is also wild. She is the tiger in the grass: she waits for the sparrow, the mouse, the rabbit, the leveret, the rat, the fish. Is it time to put out the light and go to bed? You slap in the bolt of the door and she is happy in the darkness and the rain.



The spaniel bounds over the snow, stirring wild duck from the doddle-willows: silly, affectionate, noble, dependent thing. Leaping over the frozen reeds it pretends, unlike the cat by the fire, to be a creature of the wild. All the time there is something missing: man, without whom it cannot exist; the stick for which it is running; the basket in the kitchen. What do we see in dogs?—the ridiculous little dachshund, the naked poodle, the popinjay Peke, the meat-eating mastiff, the archduke Borzoi? Do we keep them because they give us a sense of mastery? It is always the dog and his master, never the cat and his master. Down dog, up Fido, still now, fetch it! Do we like the feeling of command? The dog fetches our slippers and sets them by the fire, runs for the stick thrown over the snow, looks up at us with dark, irresistible, fathomless eyes. Isn't it strange that we never turn him out into the darkness and the rain?

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There are two seasons when the hare looks at its best : in March, on the ploughlands, when you may see six or seven or even a dozen racing in the mad circles of courtship ; and again in high summer, when the corn is ripe and the young leverets are big enough to run. The hare's eyes are set back in the head, so that, when running, it can literally look backwards. But by looking backwards for danger it often runs forward into danger. Hares may be caught when skulking in the ripe corn. You find them crouching immobilised, almost as if hypnotised, in the sun-warmed earth between the sheaves, and you spread your hands forward as if you are saying 'Sssh !' to someone, and the eyes of the hare are livid white as he watches you and waits, and you fall at last on your face and feel the bounding body of the hare beating against your heart—if he isn't already over the hill into another county.



April is often cold on the Downs ; the lambs are late with us. The primroses come with Christmas, even under snow. First there are very few. Then by February they begin to shine under the trees, still sparse, but stronger, until in March and April they are luxuriant and floppy and pink-stemmed on the steep banks where the lambs lie down and sleep in the sun. When the lambs are surprised and woken they make for the ewes with finicky gallop, and bunt with great vigour at the teats while the ewes stare with wooden animosity. Then the lambs calm down and look at you, heads aside, perky, and then suddenly dash off again, bouncing in indiarubber leaps off the grass. By the time June has come they are like thick wooden toys in the paddocks among the moon-daisies, and it is not easy to remember them as they were, asleep among the primroses or bouncing on the grass.

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The cows come down into the long meadow from the farm above the church between four and five on summer afternoons. They amble straight for the farther end, where the stream is deeper, and they come to drink there in a pool under an alder-tree, where the roach are good in the swim between the reeds. On very hot days they cool their hocks in the water, and there is a warm heavy cow-smell in the shade. Fish jump in the deep pools where there is no sunlight and a kingfisher sweeps up the narrow reaches, blue in the air, copper in the water. When they have finished drinking the cows squelch backwards along the stream, and the water curdles and clears again, and they amble away across the meadow to find shade under the oaks on the far side. When they have settled in the shade there is no movement except the flight of the kingfisher and the trembling of the dragon flies in the reeds.



In England the forests have almost gone, the wild deer with them ; but when I drive across great parks, such as Cowdray in Sussex, and see deer placidly feeding under the oak trees, I think of Queen Anne who, 'as she was journeying on the Portsmouth road, did not think the Forest of Wolmer beneath her royal regard. For she came out,' says Gilbert White, 'of the great road at Liphook, which is just by, and reposed on a bank smoothed for that purpose, lying about half a mile to the east of Wolmer-pond, and still called Queen's bank, saw with great complacency and satisfaction the whole herd of red deer brought by the keepers along the vale before her, consisting then of about five hundred head.' Pleasant to think of that specially smoothed bank, of the humanity of monarchs, of the beauty of deer. Both deer and monarchs have been becoming extinct in Europe for a long time. Pleasant to think how, in England, in times of dislocation, both survive.

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**R**ed fox, red deer, red squirrel : the tawny brightness gets rarer and rarer. Grey squirrels are to red squirrels what sparrows are to bull-finches. But watch them through field glasses and note how, sitting up, crouching, bouncing over the grass, they look like other animals : crouching, flat-bellied against the earth, like grey rats ; crouching, head on fore-paws, like young lionesses ; sitting upright, hind legs pouching, like kangaroos. Their shyness will not let you get near enough to see all this with the naked eye, but through the glasses you can watch them for a long time. The red squirrels have practically gone ; the grey are everywhere. But because of the grey you will sometimes see, in the country, a pure white one, snowy and startling as it flashes upward in the black summer trees.



If we don't hunt him, they say, he will soon be extinct. And supposing he was? How many people, from one year's end to another, ever see a fox? How many would miss him if he were gone? Odd that we should show at once such callousness and such tender regard. Hunting a fox, tearing him to shreds with trained dogs, digging him out of drains—excellent ways of preventing his extinction. Shooting a fox—practically the same thing as shooting a sea-gull, beating a dog, or eating peas with a knife. Social privilege, social snobbery, social stupidity, social bitterness—odd, but very English, that an animal can be responsible for them all.

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And who ever sees an otter? The trappings of the fox-hunt are absurd enough; the paraphernalia of the otter-hunt is comic opera for grown men. Half the sport is dressing up. Do small boys throw stones at cats?—a great reflection on their upbringing. But at selected seasons of the year you can come across grown men throwing dogs at otters. A great reflection too on their upbringing? Perhaps—but to say so is the equivalent of saying that a game with bat and ball which takes three days (or even eight days) to play, and even then isn't decided, is a stupid thing. This is sour talk. But somewhere behind the English attitude to foxes and horses, birds and dogs, cats and this beautiful shy nocturnal creature, the otter, lies a key, if we would trouble to look for it, to the national character.



On November 4, 1767, Gilbert White wrote to Thomas Pennington, 'I have procured some of the mice mentioned in my former letter, a young one and a female with young, both of which I have preserved in brandy. From the colour, shape, size and manner of nesting, I make no doubt that the species is nondescript. . . . They breed as many as eight in a litter, in a little round nest comprised of the blades of grass or wheat. One of these nests I procured this autumn, most artificially plaited, and composed of the blades of wheat, perfectly round, and about the size of a cricket-ball, with the aperture so ingeniously closed, that there was no discovery to what part it belonged. . . . This wonderful "procreant cradle," an elegant instance of the effects of instinct, was found in a wheat-field suspended in the head of a thistle.' And so was published the first account of the harvest mouse.

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Two pictures of horses : the yeoman and the gypsy, the domestic and the wild. On Dartmoor and Exmoor and in the New Forest the gathering and scampering against the heather and the trees ; the long-skirted tails, the fiery timidity. On thousands of farms the ploughing team, the steadiness, the nobility, the symbolic harness brasses. Between the two lies much that is most loved in England : the placid cultivation, the unexpected wild ; the solid respectability of tradition, the gypsyish hedgerow. In a country like ours, where almost all the beauty of landscape is man-made, the bits of wild survival are precious. But we begin to cling too to the bit of civilised survival. The tractor overtakes the shire-horse, and our generation begins to look at him with sentimental affection : symbol of an age that was not disrupted. Small wonder, thinking of its solidity, simplicity and strength, all symbolised so well by the team at plough, that we begin to doubt our own.



CALENDAR FOR 1943

	JANUARY					FEBRUARY					MARCH					APRIL							
S	..	3	10	17	24	31	..	7	14	21	28	..	7	14	21	28	..	4	11	18	25	..	
M	..	4	11	18	25	..	1	8	15	22	..	1	8	15	22	29	..	5	12	19	<b>26</b>	..	
Tu	..	5	12	19	26	..	2	9	16	23	..	2	9	16	23	30	..	6	13	20	27	..	
W	..	6	13	20	27	..	3	10	17	24	..	3	10	17	24	31	..	7	14	21	28	..	
Th	..	7	14	21	28	..	4	11	18	25	..	4	11	18	25	..	1	8	15	22	29	..	
F	1	8	15	22	29	..	5	12	19	26	..	5	12	19	26	..	2	9	16	<b>23</b>	30	..	
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	SEPTEMBER					OCTOBER					NOVEMBER					DECEMBER							
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