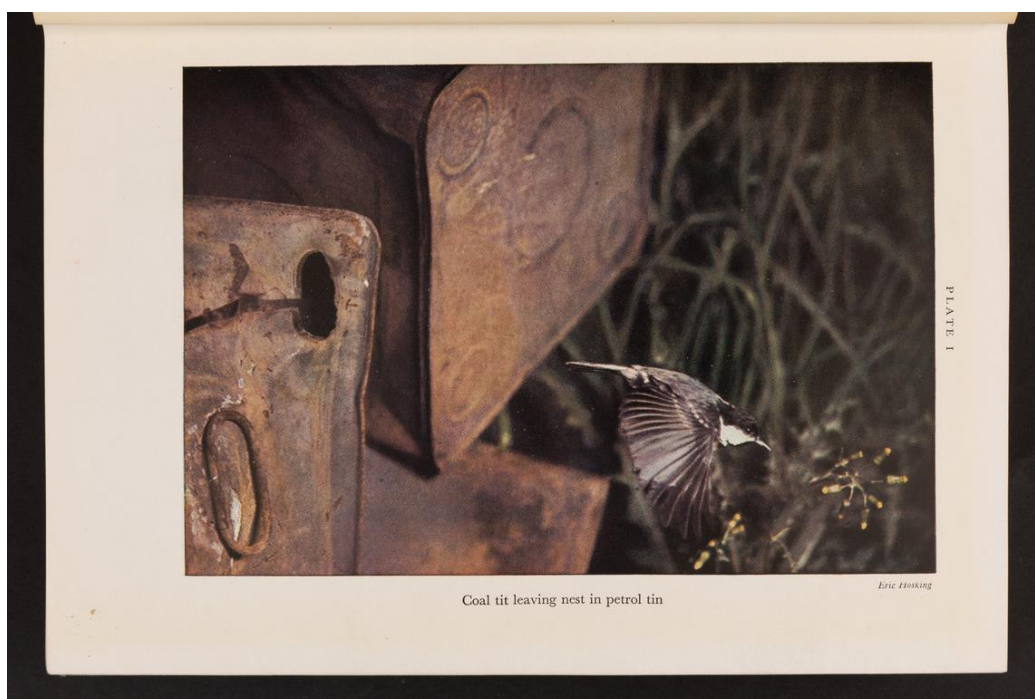


42. *Birds and Men*

In this response, the nature writer Nicola Chester shares her unique reflections on a mid-century book about birdlife, which was published in 1951. Read on to find out more about naturalist Max Nicholson and his influential role in conservation, and to hear more about the the impact of twentieth-century farming on bird species.

Edward Max Nicholson, *Birds and Men* (London: Collins, 1951)



Colour plate showing coal tit with a nest in a petrol tin, from *Birds and Men* (MERL Library 1840-NIC).

There is nothing like an old bird book to shock you out of ‘shifting baseline syndrome,’ that creeping, amnesiac change in what we think of as ‘normal’ when it comes to the abundance, presence, and diversity of nature. And this is where old bird books are particularly well-positioned to deliver a shock. Where memory, knowledge, and the actual experience of how things *were*, is lost (or changes over time and successive generations) those particular books put us straight. *Here* is where the birds were, they say – and so many. The evidence stops you in your tracks; winds you with facts and sometimes, as in the case of this book, floors you with its prescience, foreknowledge, and hope that a disaster foretold might be averted.

Birds and Men was a book ahead of its time. Published in 1951, the year The MERL was established just up the road from me, in Reading, it was the first book on birds (and the seventeenth) in the iconic Collins New Naturalist series. Its subject was radical enough; ‘the impact of civilisation upon our bird life at a time when interest in nature itself was continuing to grow, post-war. The inside flap

of the jacket informs us that *Birds and Men* is ‘undoubtedly one of the most important contributions to the literature of British ornithology of recent years.’

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The substantial and comprehensive contents page from Nicholson's *Birds and Men* (MERL Library 1840-NIC).

Its author, (Edward) Max Nicholson (1904–2003), was already a pioneering environmentalist ‘well known to many for his popularisation of the scientific study of birds as a means of their protection.’ His influence was far-reaching, galvanising, and revolutionary. He was among the first to examine the toxicity of man's new chemical romance upon birds. He was also a great advocate in encouraging amateur observations and access to nature. By the time *Birds and Men* was published, he was instrumental in founding the British Trust for Ornithology, the (now) International Union for Conservation of Nature (the IUCN), oversaw the creation of The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and associated protection, and chaired the committee for the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Post *Birds and Men*, Nicholson was only just getting going, establishing, with others, the Worldwide Fund for Nature, the International Institute for Environment and Development, the (now) Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Earthwatch and the Trust for Urban Ecology. Even in the year 2000, in his mid-nineties, he drew attention to the decline of the ‘once common’ house sparrow, and secured government funding for research.

Having the foresight to focus on the impact of man upon birds, with chapters on *How Men Have Shaped Nature*; *Farm Lands and Farm Birds*; and *Birds of Towns and Buildings*, makes this a very important

book indeed. But it is the sections on farming and birds that are the most affecting and poignant: particularly now, exactly seventy years after the publication of this book, where Nicholson observes, ‘unquestionably, the relations which go furthest back and have least changed must be those between birds and man as farmers.’ Because so very much has changed, and so much lost – and Nicholson saw it coming.



Nature writer and author of this piece, Nicola Chester, out and about exploring farmland near her home (Image © Nicola Chester).

A joint study by the RSPB, BirdLife International, and the Czech Society for Ornithology published in 2021 concluded bird populations across Europe have fallen by around 600 million individuals in the past 40 years alone. Critically, the declines are most devastating on farmland. Intensification, habitat loss and chemical farming are wiping birds from the worked, rural landscape. Seventy years ago, Nicholson wrote ‘new poisons ... are broadcast over the earth before anyone has the time to test what and who else they are going to kill into the bargain.’

The most seriously affected, he notes, are the ground nesting species; specifically, birds like ‘skylark, yellow wagtail, and lapwing may well be eliminated altogether from intensively farmed areas.’

Nicholson delights in concertinaing time, stating that the first farmers only really got to work a hundred and forty generations of countrymen ago, or around 4300 generations of skylarks. The two are intrinsically linked.

Our own tenanted, farmworkers cottage, was one of six begun the year *Birds and Men* was published, by the then MP for Newbury, John Astor. Ours was the cowman's cottage. Replacing tiny, damp, tumbledown chalk-and-gorse dwellings, these houses embraced the hopeful efficiency, cleanliness, and modern practicality of the mid-century. And the farming continued under the watchful eye of the first farmers of the place, in their Neolithic long barrow, on the high Gallows Down above.



Peering through the hedgerow at the roof and chimney stack of a worker's cottage (Image © Nicola Chester).

When those first farmers began to clear trees for agriculture, some 6,000 years ago, it suited the birds and we have shared ecological history since. Lapwings, the elegant poster bird on the cover of *Birds and Men* are a case in point. With the most vernacular names of any farmland bird, 'Lapwings, like farmers, are tied to the soil' notes Nicholson, and that 'on the whole it has worked out well ... with the friendliness thus inspired in the farmers, in turn benefits the lapwings.' Preferring open landscapes, lapwings nest where they can see predators coming, reacting early to drive or draw threats away. The scrape-nest is hardly there, and the four eggs are cryptically camouflaged in soil, flint, and chalk colours. The birds' aerobatics, the creaky buzz of wings at close quarters, the flash of black, white, petrol green and purple as well as their excitable, looping, out-of-this-world song, has become, with skylark song, what Richard Mabey called 'a hymn to agricultural triumph'. But this

thousands-of-years-old, working partnership was at stake by 1951, with drastic and rapid changes in farming methods; and a 'speed and heavy-handed thoroughness,' they could not adapt to.

Our rented, former cowman's cottage is now a home for rural keyworkers. I received a letter there, 7 years ago, from a 97-year-old former ploughman called Geoff Painting. 'Fanatical about green plovers or peewits,' as he called them, he lamented he couldn't see them anymore from his village council house garden. He invited me for tea and described stopping the horses, then the tractor at nests, scooping them up into the next furrow and replacing them when the plough passed. This tender act was common then, and a single egg was often pocketed to take home and eat. Geoff met his wife Angela when she encouraged him to join the Society of Agricultural Unionists. He won ploughing competitions for his straight furrows with horse, then tractor alongside the A4 at Hungerford. The house – built in a similar design to ours, was a homage to lapwings, in paintings, on plates, trays, mugs, cards and even a life-size bronze.

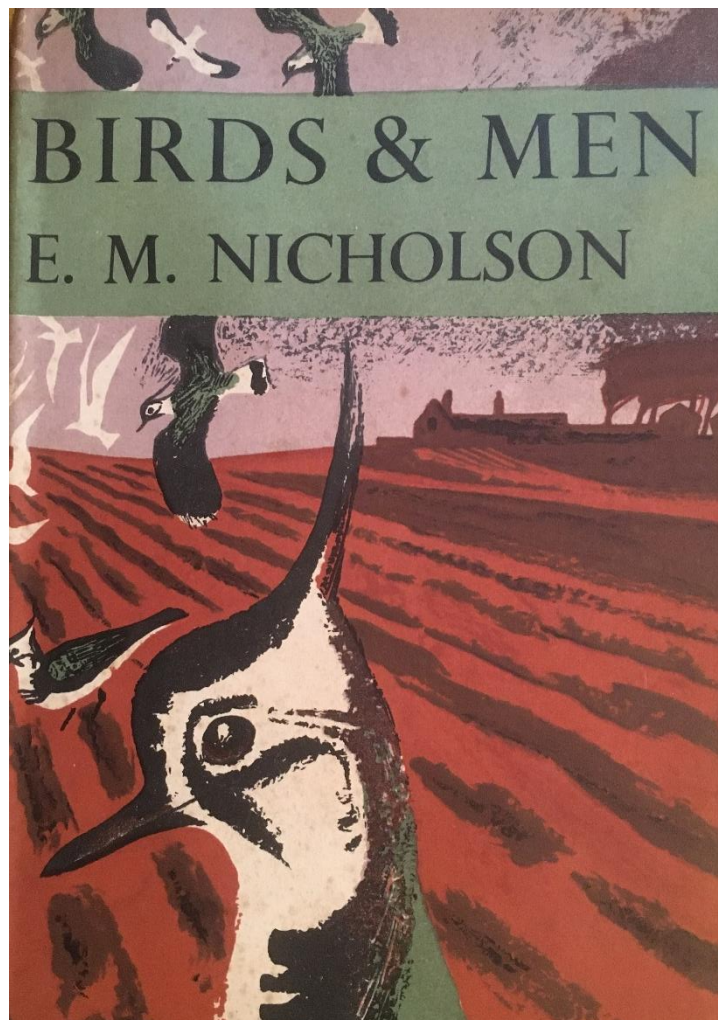


Illustration by Clifford and Rosemary Ellis on the dust jacket on Nicola Chester's copy of *Birds and Men*.

We drove Geoff and Angela out to see what we both said were 'the last of the lapwings.' He shed a silent tear and I had to look away. I wondered what must it be like to have lived a life in the fields, to know its birds and creatures and to feel the seasons warm and cool on the skin – and then not to have

access to it anymore? But Geoff told me there is beauty in the simplest of known things; an enduring connection: a swallow scything the air, the straightness of a furrow ploughed, lines drawn and redrawn across a beloved land – lapwings.

The beautifully illustrated cover of *Birds and Men* is by Clifford and Rosemary Ellis and is also ahead of its time. Their fresh, modern lithographs illustrated transport posters as well as book jackets, and this one (as with all their others) demonstrates a deep knowledge, study of, and delight in these birds, their landscape and character. A stunning selection of colour and black-and white plates within the book, taken by highly regarded photographers such as Eric Hosking, continue the theme of close observation and delight with a modern, energised approach. I particularly like the coal tit leaving its nest in a discarded petrol can. Modern bird books are guilty of another affliction – that of shifting habitat syndrome. We re-assign the birds to different habitats when we destroy a pre-existing one. Farmland birds become wetland birds and ‘can be found on nature reserves.’



Black and white plate from *Birds and Men* showing a kestrel in a church tower (MERL Library 1840-NIC).

Birds and Men is both desperately sad and radically hopeful. What it began to show us in 1951 and what came to pass, was an exercise in modernism – in scientific observation for the protection of species, in amateur-observer involvement and empowerment, in joy, grief, and connection. These are all tropes of the new nature writing, committed as acts of resistance to loss, bearing witness and crucially, waving a red warning flag, ever more frantically.

Progress, efficiency, need, want and change has always been part of farming. But does a countryside denuded of wild birds have to be the cost? Modern farming makes refugees of the birds. Where then, must they live?

The cover flap of *Birds and Men* states ‘readers will be delighted ... by the note of optimism ... the suggestion that not all the works of man are fated to destroy nature, and that some of them are likely to improve the quantity and variety of our birds.’

And there it is, the hope. The action.

Seventy years later, the ‘farmer clusters’ working together to bring back corn buntings; the beetle banks preserved from the sprayer; the bird cover crops and supplementary feeding, and the seed drills lifted at the touch of a button to leave little bare squares for skylarks to nest in, are all acts of hope.



A wintery farm scene near Nicola Chester's home (Image © Nicola Chester).

On the winter's morning I finish writing this, the spiders have been at work, making ghostly semaphore flags on the old grass & dockheads. There is the Morse code of bullfinch, the ticking of a wren, the low piping of nuthatches & the rattle of fieldfare. Sparse. Not abundant. I can't help but hear the warning in it all. The ticking of a cooling engine, a winding down. I have to listen, hard. I think of Max Nicholson's optimism and of Geoff the ploughman's belief in the continuity of things, and I want to believe. I turn into the cover crop and disturb a flock of yellowhammers, goldfinches, and linnets, like a pocket full of loose change flung up, chinking, into the air. And I think too, of the growing diversity of engagement and action for nature – birds and women, for one - and I hope with all my heart.



Black and white plate from *Birds and Men* showing house sparrows harvesting a crop (MERL Library 1840-NIC).

Further Information (online):

For more information about The MERL's copy see: [MERL Library 1840-NIC](#)

For more about Nicholson see: <http://www.maxnicholson.com/index.html>

Follow the author of this piece on Twitter: [@nicolawriting](#)

Follow more information on Nicola Chester and her writing see: <https://nicolachester.wordpress.com/>

For details of Nicola's new book, *On Gallows Down*: <https://chelseagreen.co.uk/book/on-gallows-down-2/>

Organisations that form part of Nicholson's legacy:

For British Trust for Ornithology see: <https://www.bto.org/>

For International Union for Conservation of Nature see: <https://www.iucn.org/>

For World Wide Fund for Nature see: <https://www.wwf.org.uk/>

For International Institute for Environment and Development see: <https://www.iied.org/>

For The Conservation Volunteers (inclusive of former Trust for Urban Ecology) see: <https://www.tcv.org.uk/>

For Earthwatch see: <https://earthwatch.org/>