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Opinion
Birdwatching

I saw a peregrine falcon swoop over Waitrose the other day. Look up, you won't regret it
Hamza Yassin



Anyone can watch birds - from iridescent starlings to the gulls that steal chips - and it always brightens up a grey day



People are sometimes surprised when I say my favourite bird in Britain is the starling: A murmuration over Ham Wall RSPB reserve in Somerset. Photograph: Guy Corbisley/Alamy

When I was a little boy growing up on the banks of the Nile in Sudan, my favourite bird was the weaver bird. The locals called them birds of paradise because they're beautiful colours, and they weave their little nests up in the trees. Sometimes a nest will fall down and the kids will play football with it. But eight-year-old me had so many questions: where do they go for six months of the year? How do they take their food with them? A lot of farmers in Africa would time the sowing of their seeds by the arrival of particular birds, knowing that when they leave, that's harvest time. We all used to be much more connected to nature at one point, and I think it's sad how little most people these days get outdoors.

People are sometimes surprised when I say my favourite bird in Britain is the starling. But just look at them! Have you ever noticed that those speckles on their chests are tiny little love hearts? Or that they can fly in murmurations of 50,000 birds and they never bump into each other? They're also fantastic mimics: you can teach them phrases, like a parrot. I have a woodburning stove where I live on the west coast of Scotland, and one day I opened it and heard what I thought was the sound of a cow and an oystercatcher emanating from the chimney. Lo and behold, it was a starling.

Once you really see birds, they are all fascinating. Do you see that red dot on a herring gull's lower mandible? The babies tap on that dot and the parent immediately regurgitates the food. And if you don't want a gull to steal your chips, don't hide them away and behave like a victim; you've got to stare the bird down. And did you know that blackbirds don't sing in the dead of night - except in modern cities, where light pollution keeps them awake longer? Or that the Latin name for a thrush is *turdus*?



'My parents put on the television, and there was Attenborough.' David Attenborough with a golden eagle in The Life of Birds (1998). Photograph: NPL/Rex/Shutterstock

Watching birds is a gateway into the natural world. They're everywhere, and you don't need any specialist equipment or knowledge to appreciate them: just open your eyes and a window, or better still, go for a walk. Patience will help you to see more birds; and birding will help you to be more patient. It's my version of meditation. If I'm having a tough day, I just pick up my binoculars and get out of the house. To be honest, I prefer the winters, because you don't have to wake up super early to hear the dawn chorus.

David Attenborough and Steve Irwin lit the spark in me when it comes to the natural world. When I first came to Britain, I didn't speak a word of English, but my parents put on the television, and there was Attenborough narrating *The Life of Birds*. He had this beautiful tone of voice, whereas Irwin was this absolute livewire of a dude, with his passion for animals oozing out of him. I'd grown up with crocodiles as an immediate danger, but he made them beautiful in their own way. I wanted to be David and Steve. Or if not them then the person who filmed them, because, clearly, they had the best lives ever.

Now I get to educate the next generation, and I feel so lucky. To some degree, the pressure of preserving the natural world is on our shoulders right now, but the next generation is going to have it even harder. Fortunately, though, children are the best. They haven't learned to hate anything yet, and they use their eyes to describe things, not their judgment. When they meet me, they don't say: "Ranger Hamza is black." They say: "He's got big, long hair. And he's always wearing a backpack." You show them a pigeon and they just go crazy. It's a sense of wonder and a new way of looking at things that I have, too, and I hope I never lose.

I guarantee that birding is a gateway to that wonder - and all you really have to do is look up. The other day, in London, I saw a peregrine falcon swoop over Waitrose, and everyone else around me was staring down at their mobile phones. So step outside, look around and reconnect a little with nature. If you take the time to stop and listen, you'll find that the world is full of song.

Hamza Yassin is a wildlife cameraman and presenter, an ornithologist and the winner of *Strictly Come Dancing* 2022. He is the author of *Be a Birder: The Joys of Birdwatching and How to Get Started*

As told to Katy Guest

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