

Nature note: the sound of summer

I found a rare bird the other day. Not one of those exotic vagrants that twitchers rush to see – displaced and therefore doomed. This one was very much at home, and that’s what was so comforting and at the same time so poignant about it. I heard a familiar summer sound that seemed to rise from some deep well of common memory.

The song of the turtle dove – its gentle, purring tones still an annual reassurance, but now also sounding a new note of warning. The place I heard it is a traditional site at Boyton where they just hang on every year, but this may soon be the only site in Suffolk where you can reliably find them, and the larger national picture is disastrous: a decline of some 95% in Britain in the last thirty years, so *functionally extinct*, to use the brutal scientific verdict.



Turtle dove

Contributed

The turtle dove has long been deeply embedded in our culture. This is the song that heralds the season of growth and warmth *when the voice of the turtle is heard in the land*. The song is so powerfully evocative that it almost defeats direct description and a writer friend of mine once happily imagined it as *the sound of ripening corn*. The English name is onomatopoeic of the song, of course, like the French *tourterelle*, both of them imitating its soothing notes. The doves are also poetic symbols of marital devotion, since they are loyal not only to their traditional nesting sites but also to their life-long partners.

Why this precipitous decline? It’s a combination of reasons, but all of them ultimately related to human factors, alas. First, they have been very badly affected by the intensification of farming that has tidied up all the field edges and hedgerows and killed off the weedy plants the turtle dove depends on for its diet (fumitory is its favourite source of seeds). Secondly, they are still slaughtered in their millions (yes, literally – up to four million at the last count) as migrants returning northwards from Africa run the gauntlet of hunters in Mediterranean countries like Malta, Greece and Cyprus. And lastly, their winter quarters in Africa itself, are rapidly being degraded by drought and development: a triple whammy.

Our generation could be the last to hear turtle doves in Britain. Don’t say it couldn’t happen. Remember its cousin the passenger pigeon. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was the most abundant bird in North America, with flocks sometimes numbering billions, which darkened the skies as they passed over. But the very last wild passenger pigeon was shot in 1901.

Jeremy Mynott, Shingle Street