

## Nature Notes

### All at sea

Well, the whole nation was entranced by *Blue Planet 2*, wasn't it? It was the most popular TV programme in 2017, peaking with 17 million viewers. It beat all the familiar favourites like *Strictly Come Dancing*, *The X Factor*, *The Great British Bake-off* and *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me out of Here*. Of course, *Blue Planet* had a celebrity of its own presenting it, the wonderful David Attenborough, who is the nearest thing we have to a secular saint in Britain and a gold-plated national treasure.

The great thing about Attenborough as a presenter is that he doesn't seek centre stage himself, as most other presenters do. In fact, he only appears before the camera once or twice in the whole series. What he does is draw us in with his boyish enthusiasm and curiosity and then show us things. Extraordinary things in the case of *Blue Planet 2*: like the bottle-nose dolphins surfing the waves, the Humboldt squid eating each other when they had run out of lantern fish, the giant trevally leaping out of the water to catch terns flying over, the tusk fish smashing clams on a rock, the female giant wrasse changing gender to thwart male advances, and a high IQ octopus collaborating with a coral grouper to flush out prey from rock crevices. All the sex and violence you could possibly want in an evening's entertainment, and OK to watch without guilt, since it was just about fish, cetaceans and cephalopods doing what comes naturally.

Or was it? Was it actually about us? It certainly packed a moral punch at the end, when Attenborough showed us the extent of the damage we are inflicting on marine life. The images couldn't have been more vivid, or harrowing: a turtle choking on a plastic bag, dead fish in their thousands floating in polluted waters, an albatross hooked on a long line, and the Great Barrier Reef bleaching and dying before our very eyes. It illustrated a larger paradox in our national life. We love watching wildlife on TV. We join conservation bodies like the RSPB (over a million members) and the National Trust (over five million members). We tend our gardens and feed our birds like no other country, and we sing of England's 'green and pleasant land'. But there are 40 million fewer birds in Britain than there were in 1970, we've lost over 50% of our ancient woodlands and a staggering 99% of our flowering meadows. Yet when did you last hear a politician talking seriously about wildlife conservation? Did the 17 million viewers of *Blue Planet* ever look beyond their TV screens?

### Jeremy Mynott

