

## Nature Note

This month's nature note comes from the Lake District, where we have been for a few days, seeing in the autumn, so to speak. The air was much fresher and cooler in the hills there than in our flat southern climes and, of course, the sights and sounds were very different too. I'd climbed up by a rocky mountain stream – a ghyll or gill, as they call them locally – and paused for breath near the top. The landscape at first seemed bereft of wildlife of any kind, if you didn't count the sheep noisily cropping the grass and belching methane gas into the atmosphere. Then, over the lovely rushing sound of the stream, I suddenly heard a bird song you will never hear in East Anglia. It was a medley of sweet twittering notes mingled with harsher grating ones, which cut through the gurgling of the river and seemed to emerge from the very midst of the current.

As indeed it did. It was a dipper, a strange bird that lives in these fast-flowing waters, literally 'dipping' under the surface to feed on caddis larvae, snails and fish eggs on the river-bed, then plopping up to sit briefly on a boulder before flicking off up-stream again. It looked rather like a squat blackbird with a beer belly and a gleaming white chest. Indeed, one local folk name for the dipper is 'water blackbird'.



Contributed

I'm still sitting quietly on my rock on the hillside and I now become aware of other

*Dipper*

things I'd have missed if I'd been striding along the way I usually do. There are small finch-like birds feeding on the alder trees on the river bank and making a sort of buzzing noise – siskins, which come further south in winter and can sometimes be seen on our bird tables. A few pale autumn crocuses were peeping out around the alder trunks and there were mysterious tufts of ferns sprouting from the banks. In a deep pool where the river paused briefly in its headlong descent I could see through the clear water a brown trout winnowing its fins to stay almost motionless in the current. And small tribes of insects were exploring the ground around my feet.

It was the Lakeland artist and writer, John Ruskin, who reminded us the importance of sometimes just sitting and looking. He said, 'The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.'

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