

History, Haven, Mere and Moss

ASK YOURSELF WHAT CHESHIRE IS BEST KNOWN FOR. CHEESE? FOOTBALLER'S WIVES? THE CLAIMS TO FAME MIGHT SOUND DISPARATE, BUT IN TRUTH THE COUNTY'S FORTUNES ARE TIED TO ITS NATURAL RESOURCES – WHETHER THAT'S DAIRY PASTURE FOR THE COWS OR ACRES FOR A MILLIONAIRE'S MANSION.

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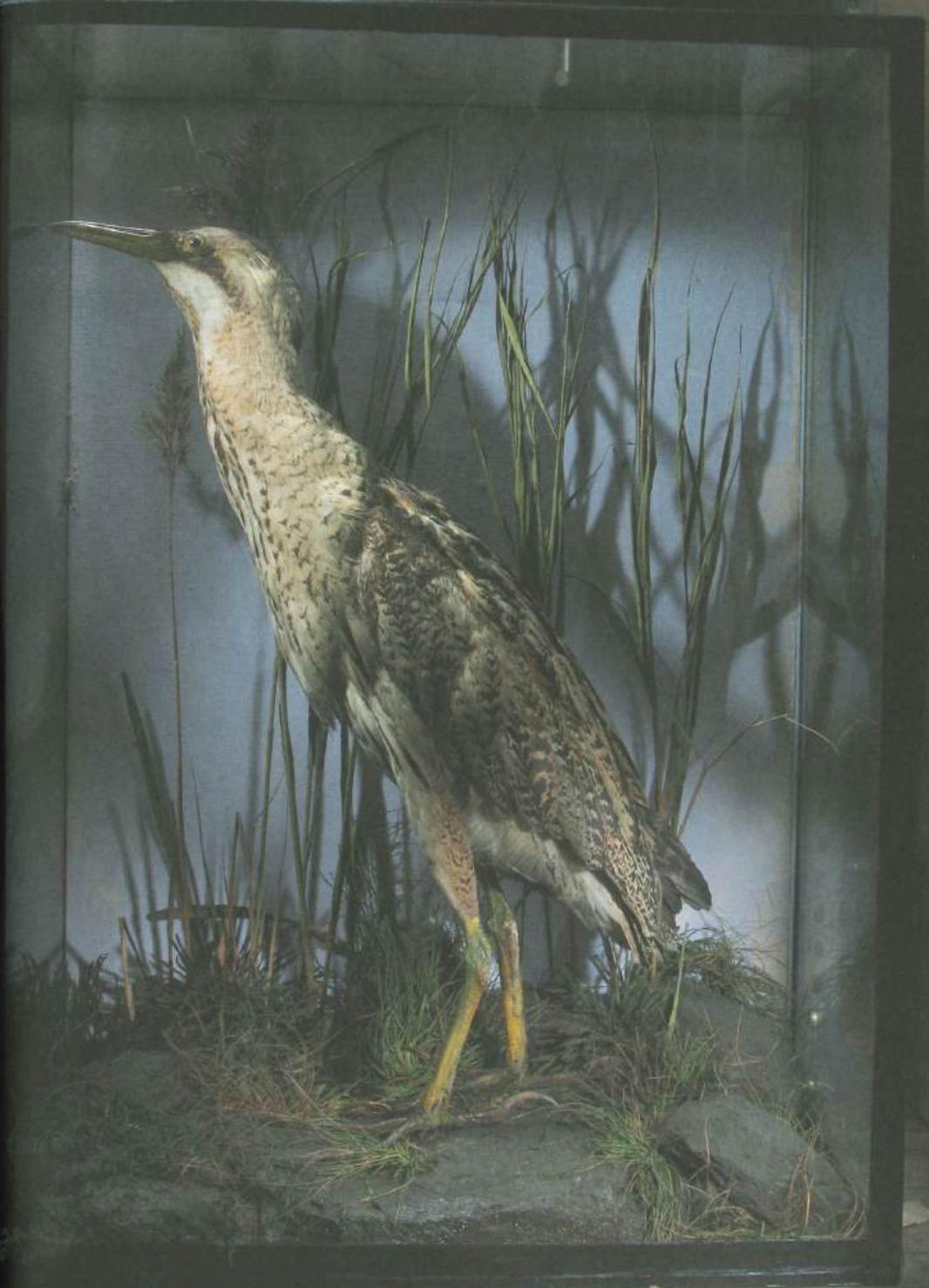
While locals know Cheshire has more to offer than just fields, we could definitely be more vocal about it – or at least put it down in writing. There's no shortage of highlights to shout about around here, from the rare natterjack toads of Red Rocks on the Wirral to the busy bat colonies of Tatton Park. Even our urban areas are wild: how many city centres are like Chester, with salmon swimming through, and peregrine falcons flying above? We have the most ponds of any county which provide havens for myriad species. Our meres and mosses are home to rare white-faced darter dragonflies, and a new UK spider species was discovered on a bog near Warrington just last year. Native honeybees that better tolerate the cold have been found in Delamere Forest and water voles still swim in the River Gowy, despite their populations declining across the country.

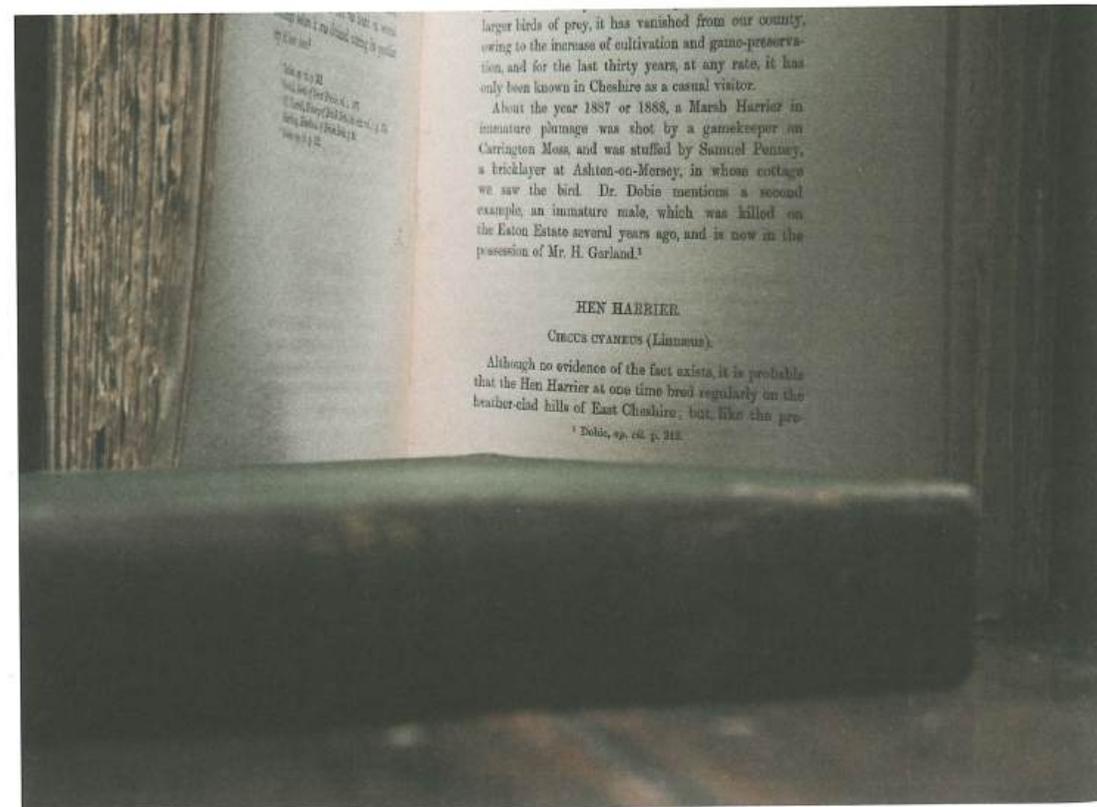
If you're a fan of feathers you'll know the Wirral peninsular is a patchwork of birding hotspots, especially Hilbre Island where the bird observatory records many unusual species on their annual migrations. In fact, birders are leading the way for county pride. Allan Conlin and Eddie

Williams were recently runners up in the British Trust for Ornithology's Best Book of the Year 2018 for their beautifully illustrated title *Rare and Scarce Birds of Cheshire & Wirral*.

The roots of such informative books can be traced back to Victorian times, when a passion for the great outdoors was firmly part of the national identity. Cheshire's wildlife rose to literary prominence through the early 20th Century, thanks to the *Manchester Guardian*. The newspaper (now just the *Guardian*) has been publishing its *Country Diary* column since 1906, and its earliest contributor was Thomas Coward. Born in Bowdon, near Altrincham, Coward was an accomplished naturalist, respected nationally for his volumes on Cheshire's wildlife, particularly its birds. His regular diaries describing local life through the seasons had readers hooked. After Coward's death in 1933, his friend A W Boyd took on the task, sharing his close observations of nature in the county. The newspaper occasionally reprints their diaries to provide an intriguing contrast with today's notes.

For more local stories, *The Boom of the Bitterbump* by Chester-based writer >>





YOU MAY HAVE HEARD OF NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER, THE IDEA THAT WE ARE LESS CONNECTED WITH NATURE NOW THAN EVER BEFORE, WITH LONG-TERM IMPACTS ON BEHAVIOUR AND WELLBEING.

Roger Stephens provides a fascinating folk history of the county's wildlife. The book explores Cheshire's wildlife through the knowledge and memories of ordinary people. Its unusual title references the local name for the bittern, a shy relative of the heron that favours reedbeds. In the breeding season, the male has an unmistakable call like a foghorn that can be heard up to two miles away. Yet the sound is a rare one in Cheshire today, the birds reached an all-time low nationally in 1997 with just 11 booming males recorded.

You may have heard of nature deficit disorder, the idea that we are less connected with nature now than ever before, with long-term impacts on behaviour and wellbeing. Journalist Richard Louv was the first to use the term in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, published in 2005, and it has been hotly debated and analysed since. Perhaps in response to concerns that we're losing touch with our landscapes, a more personal form of nature writing has become increasingly popular in recent years. You'll see the shelves at Waterstones heaving with award-winning titles from authors such as Robert McFarlane, Helen McDonald, Mark Cocker and Amy Liptrot. The surge in interest has been attributed to the anxiety of modern living: in stressful times we seek solace, and sharing observations of nature can be a balm for frayed nerves.

There are rays of hope for our wildlife on the horizon. For example, the prospects for bitterns have been slowly improving and Marbury Reedbed, near Northwich, is one of my favourite places to see one now. The Cheshire

Wildlife Trust reserve was purchased as a memorial to Thomas Coward, so it seems a fitting site to celebrate a return to form for the county's wildlife.

It's arguably easier than ever to be a nature writer, now that we can self-publish online with a few keystrokes and clicks. Blogs, such as Mike Mottram's *Diaries of a Cheshire Wildlife Watcher*, offer popular platforms for enthusiasts to express themselves with regular updates building a rich archive. Others share quick hits via social media, and embrace Instagram stories, Twitter threads and Facebook posts to describe their encounters in more detail.

I'd encourage you to take some time yourself to express what you love about the landscape. Whether you take a digital approach or slow things down Tortoise-style with a notebook and pen, the first step is to find a green space to immerse yourself in. Walk quietly and leisurely, stopping regularly to focus on what is often overlooked. What colours and shapes catch your eye? Change your perspective by looking above and below >>



your normal line of sight. Can you hear any unusual calls, the whirr of wings or rustle of grass? Forget about your phone for fifteen minutes and engage all of your senses. Can you smell anything different underneath the agriculture or industry?

A famous quote among conservationists comes from Senegalese forestry engineer Baba Dioum. It begins "we will only conserve what we love...", so let's pen some love letters in praise of our wildlife. Whether you express yourself through poetry, story, blog or tweet you can help build a record of Cheshire's value beyond farming and fake tan, and perhaps move us a step closer to protecting these natural riches.

LOSSES AND GAINS

Cheshire's wildlife has had a tumultuous time since Coward's country diaries were published. Comcrakes, land-dwelling relatives of moorhens, have suffered catastrophic declines and were thought to no longer nest in the county after the early 1970s. One pair did nest in 1987 near Tatton – only for both adults and the juvenile to be killed by traffic.

A bird species that has had a positive turnaround in fortunes is the Eider Duck. Prized for the female's soft downy feathers, the birds were teetering on extinction in the 19th Century but saved by early conservation efforts. From 1960 the birds have become annual winter visitors to the north Wirral coast.

The Cheshire and Wirral Bird Atlas records the fortunes of our feathered friends and relies on volunteer surveys for its data. To find out how your sightings can help map our wildlife's fortunes, a great place to start is rECORd - the local biological records centre. From tiny solitary bees to majestic birds of prey, every record counts towards conservation. 🦋

Special thanks To Liz Montgomery at Grosvenor Museum.
Visit www.record-lbc.co.uk to find out more.



EIDER DUCK, FEMALE *Somateria mollissima* Linn
RARE, WANDERER TO THE COAST, OBTAINED INLAND
NR SAUGHTON, NR CHESTER, DEC: 10, 1844
PRES BY MR R J SMITH (LATE) 8095-94