

AT FIRST IT WAS EASY

JOHN DEMPSEY

At first it was easy.

I'd struggle over autumn dunes, settle down to be buffeted in a north westerly, then scour the waves for shearwaters, petrels and skuas through binoculars that first saw action on the racecourses and dog tracks of southern Ireland, before the passing of my Uncle Jim meant they came to me.

A small boy looking out on the grey vastness of Liverpool Bay.

Go out. See seabirds. Easy.

Now it is not so straightforward—the more I learn about the history of the place, the more I find it difficult to look at any element of the coast in isolation—maritime history, botany, world wars, trade, habitat damage, ecology, habitat management, pollution, agriculture, conservation, climate change, erosion—they all start merging together. I still spend way too long looking at birds, sure, but now when I watch a Leach's Petrel sailing through the terrifying swell of raging autumn gales, links start leaping across the synapses ... I see the remote massif of St Kilda where these diminutive seabirds breed; I try to imagine what it must have been like for crews on stricken ships when hurricane force winds turned the bay into a maelstrom in the Victorian era.

Leach's Petrels move as gracefully as ice skaters over the crests and troughs that claimed vessels like the *Star of Hope*, the *Ionic Star* and *Pegu* and, of course, the *Mexico* and *Charles Livingstone*.

Perhaps the supreme skill with which true seabirds master the air in even the wildest of conditions is what makes them so alluring—that and their far-flung destinations.

From the Bay of Biscay to Tierra Del Fuego they roam the wild seas outside the breeding season.

The romance of a bundle of feathers winging off to the southern Atlantic to wander deserted oceans while we batten down the hatches for a northern winter grabbed my attention at eight years of age, as surely as the thought of the trade routes and the potential of 'destination anywhere' did when I learnt more about the incredible maritime history of Liverpool Bay.

I've always been a sucker for a horizon, or to be more accurate, what lies beyond it.

Cotton traders and whalers. Petrels and Shearwaters. The same.

The notion of constant movement, of change and transit is inescapable here—tens of thousands of wading birds move along the coast in spring and autumn, stopping off as we would at a motorway service station to fuel up before northward journeys to the arctic—or southbound migrations to African shores in autumn resume.

Their names are as marvellous as their journeys: Sanderling, Knot, Bar Tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Turnstone.

As we watch the waders, tens of thousands of tonnes of shipping cargo slip out of Liverpool Bay behind them, heading to destinations as distant and romantic as any migration goal.

Orchids sprout and bloom, are admired and photographed, then wither all too quickly for another year.

Pink-footed Geese darken October skies in staggering numbers—their calls are ingrained in the subconscious of anyone who has lived here for any length of time.

They spend their days commuting from the safety of roosting sites out on the Alt and Ribble estuaries, where no fox can catch them unawares on the open sand and mud, to the rich peaty fields of the Lancashire mosslands that surround the dune system.

But they'll still go back to Iceland to breed, leaving a vacuum in grey skies that is filled each spring with Swallows and Swifts, albeit in numbers that diminish each year.

Pink-footed Geese. Shrimping families 'putting' the estuary. The same.

It's impossible to walk on the coast, to admire the flora and fauna, and not divert into other histories.

They crowd in like parallel universes.

I crawl around on my hands and knees, dampness and cold ebbing into my joints, in search of Petalwort on cold winter days, just as collectors driven by a fascination for mosses did in Victorian times.

The search for this tiny lower plant is all-engrossing, a planet shrunk to a few millimetres of dune earth, a world in miniature, yet you can feel the hunt still developing into a towering obsession.

Literary giant Nathaniel Hawthorne strode the same dunes during his time as American consul in Liverpool, and maybe steered Herman Melville through pipe smoke and advice to the shores of genius that lie in Moby Dick, who knows?

Some experts suggest Hawthorne hated his time here.

If true, that's something I could never let pass ... how can the dunes and sands not grab you? How can you not be impressed by the scale of the place, the isolation that seems to actively resist permanent structures? The remains of a few shipwrecks, like the skeletons of beached dinosaurs, are all that seem to last for any length of time on the sands.

La Brea-on-Sea.

Most have amazing stories—the tale of the Pegu's demise rivals Whisky Galore—but there are those we know nothing about too—what brought the 'Mystery wreck' and the 'Mussel wreck' to their fates, I wonder?

Boardwalks are consumed by shifting dunes, and cafes tumbled onto the shore as other dunes disappeared beneath them.

The pier at Southport still juts out like a challenge into the southern channels of the Ribble estuary, defiantly resisting the vibrant saltmarsh's attempts to maroon it in a sea of green ... for now at least.

With the exception of one or two ongoing concerns, all that remains of the area's famous asparagus farms are furrows masked by a carpet of Dewberry and Bird's-foot Trefoil.

The wild flowers draw you in as the days lengthen—dune slacks full to bursting with a dizzying

array of species, some extremely rare, yet flourishing in this incredible eco-system.

Trying to put a name to them all is overwhelming—their life stories luring you off again into other spheres.

But seeing them in flower afresh each year is like meeting up with old friends.

Evening Primrose trumpets yellow everywhere in the dunes from midsummer into late autumn, yet its origins are in the New World— seeds came over in ballast on ships from North America.

American GIs arriving in the north-west in WW2. Evening Primrose. The same.

Grass of Parnassus and Round-leaved Wintergreen can sometimes bloom in such numbers that convincing visitors of their rarity is a hard task, but the exotic nature of our orchid species need no such hard sell, they are all beautiful.

With the summer days come our insects—Forester moths, Northern Dune Tiger Beetles, Dark Green Fritillaries, Graylings and the truly bizarre Sandhill Rustic moth, which spends most of its time under the sand, apart from a few warm August nights.

They are as tied to specific plants and habitats on the coast as the more famous residents like Natterjack Toads, Sand Lizards and Red Squirrels.

These are the ones everyone wants to see. Some are easy, others not.

A chorus of Natterjacks—‘Birkdale Nightingales’ or ‘Bootle Organs’, depending on your neighbourhood loyalties, is almost primeval on a mild and cloudy spring night.

It is certainly eerie.

The sound is as inseparable from this coast as the Marram Grass that binds the dunes, or the skittering trails left behind by startled Sand Lizards on hot May mornings.

To lose the chorus would be unthinkable.

Like all pioneer species they rely on just the right depth of warm shallow water to spawn in—too much rain and the pools are too deep for these small toads, too little and the pools dry up before Natterjack spawn can metamorphosise into tiny toadlets.

New pools are created when funds allow, and rangers beg visitors not to disturb breeding ponds by keeping dogs and curious youngsters out of the water, but each year breeding success is down to getting the right amount of rain and sufficient high temperatures to warm the shallow waters these little amphibians depend on.

It is a tough existence in a landscape that changes constantly thanks to the wind and tide.

They cling on like Britain’s first lifeboat station, launched in 1774, did at Formby Point before the coast shape-shifted and made it redundant. Natterjack Toads. Watchers in the dunes. The same.

The elements are forever remoulding the outline of the coast—no two sets of aerial photographs taken for vital monitoring work are ever alike; saltation, erosion and accretion see to that.

No respecter of age, the coast sacrifices prehistoric footprints trapped for thousands of years in sediment beds to the wind and tide as surely as the seasons turn.

We stand beside tracks left by hunter-gatherers in the Mesolithic and feel the giddy swirl of time travel as archaeologists interpret gait and stature.

Closer examination of these sediment layers may reveal the tracks of Cranes, Red Deer or the mighty Aurochs, but the wind and tide will still break up the beds at some point.

The only record of what was there is carefully documented and GPSed, frozen in photographs captured by those unable to ignore these astonishing windows into prehistory.

At first it was easy.