

Stephen Moss strolls through the year's best nature writing, taking in shrews, rolling meadowland and newly resurgent birds of prey

To mark the anniversary of the outbreak of the first world war. In **Wings over the Western Front** (Day Books), the illustrated wartime diaries of gardener and bird-watcher Collingwood "Cherry" Ingram have been ably edited by Ernie Pollard and Hazel Strouts. Another figure from that terrible conflict is commemorated in **Edward Thomas: Birdsong & Flight**, by Judy Kendall (Cecil Woolf), which examines the poet's profound fascination with birds.

This year also marks another anniversary: the death of the last passenger pigeon, Martha, in Cincinnati Zoo on 1st September 1914. The extraordinary tale of a species whose vast flocks darkened the skies of North America, before it was annihilated in just half a century, is well told in **The Passenger Pigeon** by Errol Fuller (Princeton), and **A Message from Martha** by Mark Avery (Bloomsbury). Both draw the inevitable conclusion that no species can be considered so common that it is safe from extinction.

The fortunes of Britain's birds of prey are outlined in two thoughtful books. In **A Sparrowhawk's Lament** (Princeton), David Cobham reviews the contrasting fortunes of all 15 species of Britain's breeding birds of prey, charting their comeback following the banning of DDT, which had pushed several species to the brink of dying out. A similar story is told by Ed Drewitt in **Urban Peregrines** (Pelagic), a book that documents the extraordinary revival

of the fastest creature on the planet, which now breeds in almost every major British city.

City wildlife was well covered this year, with Andrew Self's **The Birds of London** (Bloomsbury); John F Burton's charming memoir of a naturalist's postwar childhood, **Grey Daggers and Minotaurs in Greenwich Park** (Clio); and the long-awaited New Naturalist volume **Nature in Towns and Cities**, by David Goode (Collins), probably the finest work on urban ecology ever written.

Nature is often most fascinating

when studied in forensic detail. Few people do that more brilliantly than two Guardian country diarists, Paul Evans and Mark Cocker. Evans's **Herbaceous** (Little Toller) is an intense celebration of colour in plants through the seasons, while Cocker's **Claxton: Field Notes from a Small Planet** (Jonathan Cape) includes many of his evocative missives from that Norfolk village.

Another Norfolk resident, wildlife film-maker Martin Hayward Smith, has produced **My Year With Hares** (martinhaywardsmith.com) a beautifully illustrated account of his obsession with this mysterious countryside resident.

Meadowland: The Private Life of an English Field, by John Lewis Stempel (Doubleday) focuses on an even smaller canvas: it's a detailed account of a year

in the life of an English meadow, written by a man deeply connected to the small patch of land where he lives and farms. Another field features in Dave Goulson's **A Buzz in the Meadow** (Vintage), which tells the story of how the author created a home for insects in the French countryside.

Those who feel they might need a good practical guide to miniature worlds need look no further than Paul D Brock's **A Comprehensive Guide to Insects of Britain and Ireland** (Pisces). For once the publisher's hype is justified: this book really will enable you to identify virtually every insect you are likely to come across, from bees to beetles, moths to mayflies and ants to ant lions, all thanks to its excellent photographs and clear, concise and authoritative text.

Detail is also the watchword for **A History of Birdwatching in 100 Objects** (Bloomsbury), by David Callahan and Dominic Mitchell, which uses a familiar format to tell the story of how we came to watch birds in a new and quirky way. Its episodic layout makes for perfect bedtime reading, as do **Shrewdunnit: The Nature Files** by Conor Mark Jameson (Pelagic), **A Guide to Scots Bird Names** by Robin Jackson (Ptarmigan) - a comprehensive list of the many folk names for birds north of the border - and **Savannah Diaries** (Bradt) by the incomparable travel writer Brian Jackman.

The World of Birds (Natural History Museum), by Jonathan Elphick and with photographs by David Tipling, may appear to be yet another coffee-table book on birds, but it is far more than that. The specialist researcher on *Birds Britannica* has written a brilliantly detailed, wide-ranging guide to every aspect of the way birds live their lives. Whatever you want to know

about bird behaviour, distribution, physiology or classification, you can find it somewhere in these 600 pages.

The flourishing genre of nature-based memoirs is represented by **Cold Blood**, by Richard Kerridge (Chatto & Windus). Subtitled "Adventures with Reptiles and Amphibians", this is a funny, moving and compulsively readable account of the author's boyhood obsession with these often neglected creatures.

But for my nature book of the year, I must agree with the judges of the Samuel Johnson prize. Helen Macdonald's incredible **H Is for Hawk** (Jonathan Cape) is a truly original mixture of memoir, nature writing, and a blow-by-blow account of training a goshawk as a way of dealing with the grief following her father's death. It is, as the flyleaf predicts, destined to become a classic of nature writing. Macdonald's father would have been justly proud.

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Birds are the stars of 2014 ... a peregrine falcon perched above a busy road in Bristol

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