

I recently came into possession of someone's collection of bird books after his untimely death. Few others seemed interested in the collection and I was able to drive over the next day to pick up this lifetime's accumulation of a few hundred titles, including field guides, monographs and identification manuals. The deal was that I took them all or took none.

Of course, this now meant I had the somewhat monumental task of sorting them out and cleaning them up – their late owner was a heavy smoker, and I have now spent several hours with cotton pads and isopropyl alcohol making them presentable. While doing this, the breadth of the collection and the revelation of its owner's travels and travels also became apparent.

The wide-ranging accumulation of new and old volumes stretched back to the early 1980s and reflected a lifetime's obsessive pursuit of birds, from early twitching forays (during which he discovered a first for Britain in the Isles of Scilly) through worldwide birding trips encompassing Europe, Asia, North America, South America, Africa and Australasia, from tropical cloudforests to the Arctic tundra. His interests had seemingly become more focused during the last couple of decades and he had devoted himself more to monitoring and surveying waders, both at home and abroad.

This planet-wide interest was conveniently assisted by a career in advocating workers' and union rights internationally for NGOs, particularly in the world of aviation safety – a job that allowed time off and extensions to visit key habitats in the tropics. I suspect many readers of this magazine will relate to having to make time for birding around work or other life commitments, whether they are local or; if you're luckier, travelling to meetings and conventions. You can imagine the scope for off-piste birding that attending worldwide conferences would have granted. In fact, I'm sure that more than a few birders have intentionally followed career paths that allow for such opportunities, or have at least volunteered themselves.

With such a large collection of well-used, well-worn books, the whole developmental arc of a person's birding life and specialised interests could be traced. Many of the volumes were annotated, bookmarked and dated, and plane and train tickets, guide rates and phone numbers, maps, taxi receipts and checklists were all to be found, pressed like flowers between their pages. I wasn't

DAVID CALLAHAN



The birds of our lifetimes

After inheriting a collection of bird books, the personal nature of some of them set **David Callahan** on his own journey of reflection and wonder. He asks: what will our birding legacies be?

about to tally up his life list, but it would have been impressive judging by the pencil ticks in the international field guides.

Sociable or solitary?

The circumstances of acquiring this collection and working through it cumulatively induced a reflective mood. Despite being sociable in most circumstances, like many others I often use my own birding as a time to withdraw into my own thoughts. It's partly a side effect of 'getting into the zone', becoming aware of bird movements and sounds to the exclusion of the rest of the outside world and becoming absorbed into

something outside yourself, greater than yourself. But it's also just a way of taking time out from the hubbub of people themselves – their needs and obligations, the need to empathise and acknowledge, the routineness of chores and 'life admin'. People sometimes use the clichéd phrase 'communing with nature', but that's what it is – they don't have to be strictly spiritual, but solitary wanderings in the post-industrial wilderness are good for the body and mind, and afterwards enable you to attend to life's requests and demands with recharged vigour.

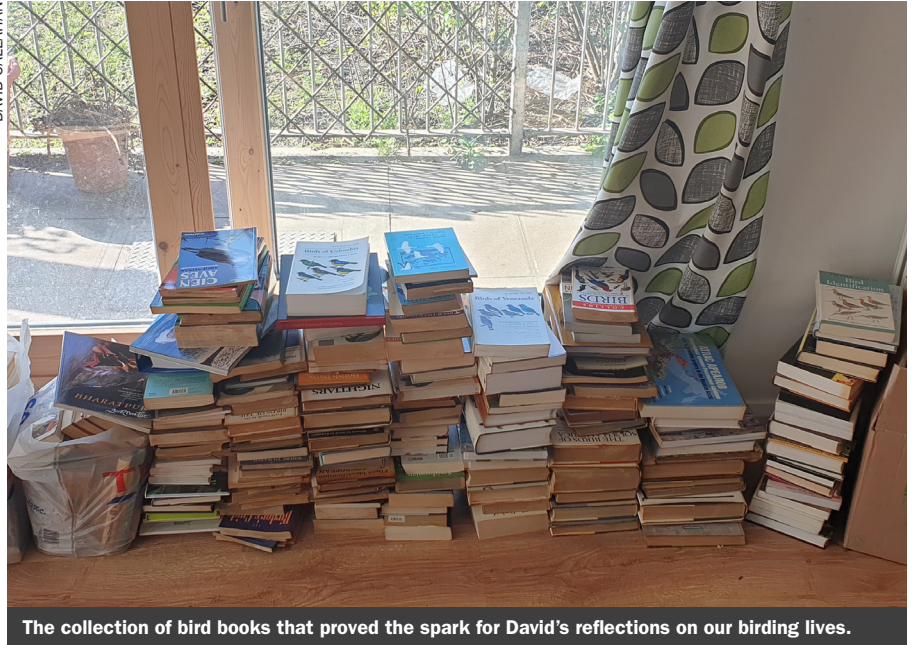
These cardboard boxes containing the traces and detritus of someone else's life began to make me wonder about



We all enjoy our birding in different ways. For some of us, the social aspect is important: being in the field with other birders, helping them out and enjoying the camaraderie is what makes the hobby (left). For others, however, it is a time to occupy your own space and appreciate solitude (right).

Facing page: As birders, we collect and store vast amounts of information during our lives. As well as acting as mementos for personal memories, this data has great scientific value.

DAVID CALLAHAN



The collection of bird books that proved the spark for David's reflections on our birding lives.

the purpose, if any, of my own birding. Is it all solely for personal gratification or should there be something more to it? In the parallel world of being able to observe someone else's life arc with a bird's-eye view, so to speak, you can sometimes see shadows of your own direction plotted out – perhaps even a possible future.

To be honest, my own trajectory has been similar but in reverse. When the hobby of birding first began to develop into one of the most crucial things in my life, I contributed to local bird societies, edited sections of local bird reports, performed a monthly WeBS count, conducted BTO Atlas surveys and organised regional counts. But life gets in the way, and I soon found that I had to snatch the odd early morning and weekend day around children, full-time work and family and friends in general. These brief reveries – whether local or far away, before work or on family holidays, or even on the very occasional twitch – were essential to my personal wellbeing. Even now, I get frustrated and irritated after a few days if I can't get out in the field.

Wandering or sedentary?

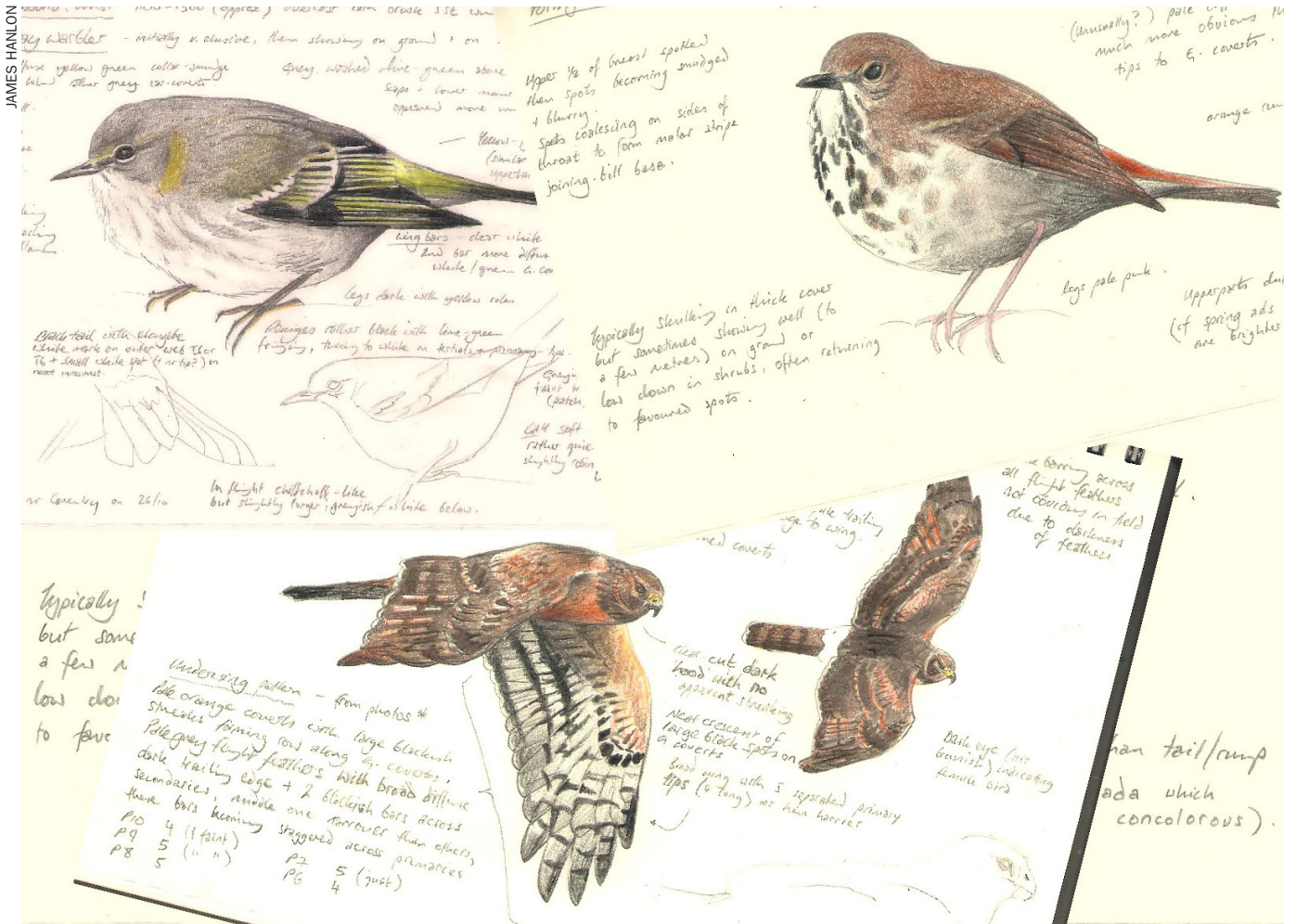
Some might say that this shows dysfunction or alienation from some parts of normal human life, but I think of it as an essential part of finding the energy and willpower to continue to take part and pull my weight. Later in life, I've found that my hobby continues to inform other endeavours, whether they be my writing or my parallel career as a musician: birds and nature creep

into my lyrics and cover designs, I meet other birders at gigs, and my writing outside the pastime seems to accumulate some level of birding mission creep, whatever the subject.

Of course, there's nothing much wrong with the superficially opposed routes of either enjoying birds at home or travelling around Britain and the world to see them. Many people do both, and often, and still find the time to live full and active lives. That said, the psychology of birders is a niche little studied. Many are obsessive, apparently having a need to constantly see more new species on their patches or nationally or globally, and many also show behavioural signs that, to the layperson, may appear slightly 'on the spectrum'. There are plenty of stories of 'hardcore' local and national birders becoming angry and bitter about missing species they 'need' – sometimes

even deserting the hobby in a strop – or undermining each other's reputations. Others have restlessly travelled the globe like Ahab pursuing his elusive whale, trying to see every species and subspecies possible, and obsessing over taxonomic splits and lumps and the additions and subtractions they may cause to their lists. You'll probably have seen or heard of some of these people yourself. Maybe you are one.

Whether this is healthy or exactly the same as the way people behave in other walks of life is very much for psychologists (or, indeed, psychiatrists) to find out. But I don't mean to make light of mental illness. Birding can be a healing salve to the troubled and overwhelmed mind, as has been memorably pointed out in depth in Joe Harkness's recent memoir of his recovery from a breakdown, *Bird Therapy*.



Making detailed notes is a great way of expanding our knowledge and understanding of the birds we see. Sharing such personal observations with worldwide citizen-science projects is a great way of contributing to the birding community.

Many birders also feel the need to contribute to our greater avian knowledge through the painstaking piecemeal of citizen science. When the appeal of just writing down the scarcer species on a birding trip or ticking a rarity eventually wears off, as it does for most, our overall sightings could just sit in a notebook, unvisited and unexamined on a shelf or in a box in the basement. Apps such as eBird and BirdTrack now take the donkey work out of entering your sightings into the public and scientific record by allowing you to log them onto your phone as they happen in the field; they also encourage you to log every species and individual bird you see, no matter how common or numerous. That's one way of ensuring your hobby makes a contribution, and it involves little more effort than a 'traditional' bins-and-notebook birding outing.

Learned or instinctive?

Citizen science goes both ways. Birders are sometimes as informed about scientific names, plumage tracts, behaviour, weather cycles and

systems, ecology, evolution, taxonomy and genetics as any postgraduate student. They make the most expert gardeners look like amateurs. And this is another way the hobby does the job of engaging people with wildlife and the living world: with knowledge comes understanding, and many birders are at the forefront of the general population in grasping just what is happening with climate change. This, in turn, leads to another quandary: is our intense need to travel the world to see the sheer variety of birds ultimately killing the objects of that desire?

There are two extremes in birding. Low-carbon birders have a point: although not travelling far to see birds won't stop climate change while Rishi Sunak still flies to Dover in a private helicopter rather than catch the train, it could be viewed as hypocritical to fly around the world merely to indulge your impulse to see a few more birds. But the birds and habitats we visit in far-flung places are often rapidly disappearing and their only short-term hope is conservation. Ecotourism is currently an essential part of that

hope, and it's likely that the absence of tourist money being spent would lead to even more neglect and destruction of the natural world, particularly in poorer countries where the inhabitants have to make snap 'eat or starve' decisions every day.

The shelves of 'pre-loved' books I acquired certainly show a life spent creating a substantial carbon footprint. It's probably not as large as that of the richest world birders, but it's much larger than those of us of more meagre means will run up over our lives. My unknowing benefactor left me clues as to how he managed to parse out his own feelings about the value of his birding: using his global trips to survey waders in his own time and contribute to the common pool of knowledge in his own small way. Perhaps that's all we can do in our graceless states: enjoy and dig deep into our wild obsessions, and encourage others to do the same. Use our observations to bulk out the greater dataset and help us understand the trends of bird populations and what they show us about the condition of this all-too-thin layer of liveable



JAMES HANLON

A lifetime's worth of notes, filled with write-ups of exciting birding trips, is something that all birders savour – but what does it say of our individual impacts on the planet? Due to the miles we cover, birders often end up having larger carbon footprints than the average citizen.

substrate on the surface of this tiny, rotating cosmic marble.

I now look in a different way at my own shelves with their monographs, identification guides, quirky junk-shop wildlife tomes and rows of field guides to places I've visited. There's even the odd guide bought speculatively and optimistically to remind me to visit somewhere I may yet never go. All this reflection came upon me by vicariously exploring the physical remnants of someone else's birding life. Deep down, I believe that any style of birding is worthwhile. I try not to be snobbish about other people's interests and I like to think that the mere act of engaging with nature contributes more to the commonweal than any aspect of celebrity culture – a superficial fuss that disappears more quickly than a breeding season and with much less importance.

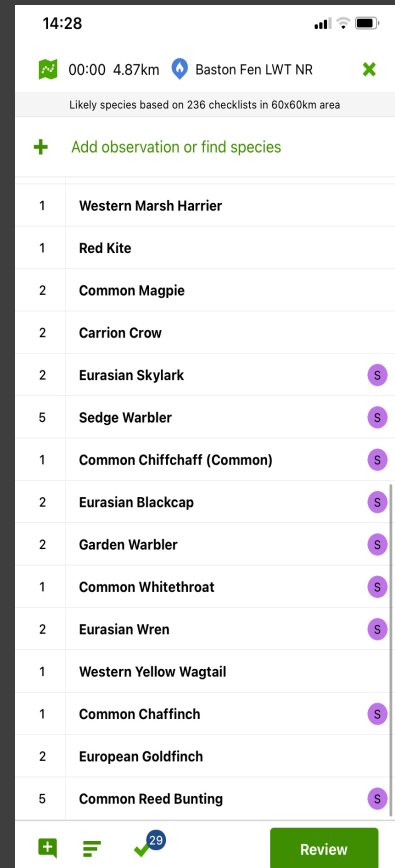
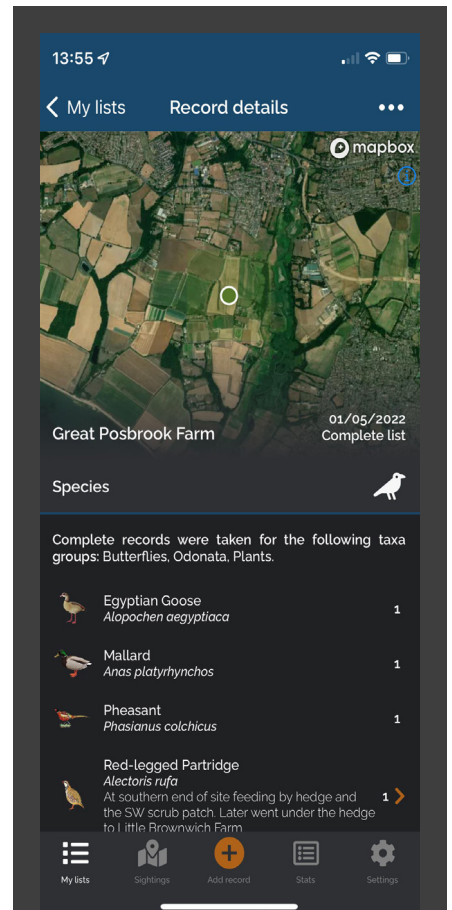
Down to the marshes

Whether I come to satisfactory conclusions about my own birding life before my time is up, I feel like I can contradict my own reflections and the words supposedly uttered by Socrates at his trial: the unexamined life *is* worth living. On my local marshlands, I can

walk among the ranks of hemlock and enjoy the birds for no reason whatsoever. Solely for the joy of it. Or to lose myself. Or to perform a survey, to seek inspiration, to accept free consolation. To breathe air containing much less exhaust fumes than usual.

All of this is in many ways of equal validity in human terms as the investigations of the most brilliant ornithologist or the identification expertise of the most astute twitcher – and there aren't really any dividing lines. I exist, the birds exist, and that is enough. I would encourage anyone to contribute their time and sightings – and frequently cajole myself to do the same – but between our busy working and family lives and our leisure time, it's the appreciation of birds and nature that counts. The awareness that all of it is finite should inspire us to at least think about ways we can help to sustain it. And I'm also grateful to the gods of randomness that I chanced upon the gift of these well-thumbed old books to give me pause for perspective.

Birding can be all things to all people – and it can be all those things to just one birder during the different phases of their life. ■



Using applications such as BirdTrack (top) or eBird when in the field ensures that your sightings are contributing to science as well as being stored for your own benefit.