

## Rob St. John

The Bridestones are a series of wind-weathered rock outcrops high above the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. As I walk between their odd, organic forms, which protrude like rapidly divided geological cells from the damp moor, the various crags and hollows provide temporary respite from the weight of the wind and heavy air.

Everything roughly in place, and even what isn't recognisable is anonymously familiar. Lapwings whirring in flight like shuffled cards; curlews with their long, steep climbs; various pipits (despite having lived around here for a year, I've still to properly tune my valley-bottom eye(s) and ears in) flitting up and over the low heather and bog. The valley head in subtle but constant flux; in motion yet seemingly all the same. Everything entangled in one way or another and then coarsely filtered through me: a creative tension between my patchy knowledge of the landscape and its natural history, and this ongoing lived experience in trying to interpret and understand it.

And then a new stitch in the fabric of the place, a flicker of something unknown and unfamiliar: the landscape momentarily reanimated and focused. I only properly saw them a few minutes later: six small plover-shaped birds in echoing flight around a freestanding outcrop weathered into the shape of an upturned teardrop, seemingly at risk of dislodging its thin foundations and tottering over. Compact and neat, round bodies in a dotted flock: some larger with brown-red chests, white-striped heads and yellow legs; some smaller and dun coloured. And with a final dot-dot-dash, this unexpected assemblage of movement and colour was gone, melting back into the moor in the slowing spring light.

All the way home I tried to keep an imprint of the encounter, a memory of all that was distinctive and new. After consulting a library of bird calls, I identified the flock as dotterels: birds of the high Cairngorm plateau, relicts of a colder climate with a shrinking habitat niche, and only temporary migratory visitors to the West Pennine moors. Dotterels nest amongst the arctic-alpine health of Cairngorm peaks above 3,000 feet, where, unusually, the larger and more brightly coloured female takes the lead in the sonic and visual wooing of courtship rituals, leaving the smaller, more inconspicuous male partner to incubate the resulting clutch of eggs. Dotterels are also unusually friendly, even foolish birds—the second part of their Latin name, *morinellus*, means 'little fool'—and as a result were widely hunted in the nineteenth century, both for their meat and for their feathers, used to tie fishing flies.

From the dotterel I came to Desmond Nethersole-Thompson, a prolific and obsessive ornithologist, who, after first encountering the bird in the Cairngorms in June 1933, devoted significant periods of time in the field to tracking and documenting their populations, resulting in the publication of a comprehensive book *The Dotterel* in 1973.

As cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer notes in a 2014 essay, “Homeland”, Nethersole-Thompson was an unorthodox character, camping out for weeks on end with his wife and young family to undertake detailed ethologies of the dotterel and other upland birds.

*The Dotterel* consists of a series of short chapters, largely dry in tone, imbued in the rhythm and repetition of the fieldworking naturalist and his deeply learnt flock. Chapter 12, entitled simply ‘Voice’, stands out. Here, the objective, quantitative tone of the other chapters is momentarily dropped, replaced instead by a set of inherently personal, and surprisingly expressive, reflections. “No one who has ever lain in a tent at night in the misty hills ever forgets the little drips of tinkling sound, always beckoning and often tantalising.”

Here, something curious happens. In writing about listening to dotterels, Nethersole-Thompson begins a process of transcribing and notating the soundscape, resulting in an odd taxonomy of phonetic neologisms: a seemingly unconscious case of the quantitative naturalist as experimental sound writer. He writes “all [the dotterel’s] cries have meaning to me. But the joy of listening is no longer enough. We have to analyse and interpret.” And, given the nascent technological context of his mid-twentieth century work, for Nethersole-Thompson, the soundscape could only realistically be translated into text, as opposed to tape. But in this sound-to-text translation, for all the talk of analysis and interpretation, a freeform landscape sound poetry emerges.

Here are a few of his transcriptions of the dotterel call (none, incidentally, describe my experience):

kwip kwip  
pue pue purr purr wā-wā-  
ter-tee ter-too

(for social contact)

tee-hee-hee  
ting

(for sex)

peep-peep-peep  
pioor pioor

(in flight)

wheep toop toop  
kwee tirra  
kwee-kwee-skirr  
kweer-kweerik-kweerik  
fuer fuer  
kee kee-kee-ee

wit-wit-wit  
wita-wita-wita-wee  
trill  
ting tings tinging

(when alarmed)

(at the nest)

whee-whee  
kee kee  
cree-crees  
tru-u-u

puerr

(when sounding 'all clear')

(with young)

skirr skirrs  
trill dru druuu

(when angry)

Perhaps paradoxically, in attempting to write about my encounter with the flock of dotterel in a way that doesn't write specifically about listening, my research on the bird has ended up concerning sound after all, yet off on a tangent that I didn't anticipate. The sounds transcribed by Nethersole-Thompson are a record of an attempt to impose an objective order on the process of listening, yet what emerges is a highly personal and oddly creative set of texts.

My own process of writing about the sound of the dotterels would doubtless be less expansive. This is partly due to my having only a brief encounter on the Bridestones; but also due to my difficulty in disentangling the birds' calls from all the other elements of that lulling evening landscape up on the tops, both tangible and not. Sometimes, I suppose, in trying to map and memorise the constituent parts of the world, there is the potential to inadvertently create new and emergent creative forms.

In these words, I don't read a replicable reference guide to dotterel calls, but instead a record of Nethersole-Thompson's enchantment with upland birds and landscapes, seeping out in these freewheeling sound-writing forms. And perhaps there is a wider organising principle here, in terms of listening to sound as much as for understanding landscape: once we start to try and disentangle one element from another, we find ourselves inextricably enmeshed in a whole bunch of other things, both expected and not.

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