

Growing up in the United-Kingdom

Searching for birds' nests

Like many a boy in the England of the after-war, as I was 8 or 10, I would spend evenings and spring week-ends to look for birds 'nests around Ruddington, the village where I was born, near Nottingham, in Center-East England. For me, it was a challenge to climb till the nest of a Magpie or a Crow, near the top of a Sycamore maple, or to pass my hand through brambles without tearing too much my sweater nor harming my skin, in order to see if the Greenfinch had laid eggs, or else, get wet to reach the moorhen's nest, or the coot's or the grebe's. I knew that ferreting birds was forbidden, and I had to satisfy my desires discretely, and hide if someone would drive or cycle by. It was of course a small disappointment to come upon an empty nest, but what a pleasure if it were occupied, to touch the eggs that were still warm. I was strongly attached to my egg collection that I would keep in a box garnished with cotton wool but I had only one per species. My collection had 52 eggs when I gave it away, and I am still not sure about the determination of several of them!

I would find passerines nests like the Goldfinch, the Dunnock, blackbirds and thrushes along hedges, which were thick when I was a teenager. You could therefore see the nest and even its occupant on the nest or flying away. Other birds would nest on bare ground. The Lapwing for example. It would commonly reproduce on farmland around Ruddington, and it was always for me a real challenge to find a nest as the eggs were so well concealed and for my eyes only. I did not yet have binoculars. The Lapwing would not hide its eggs, unlike the Snipe and it's after listening long enough to a parading Snipe that I succeeded in following it to the clump of grass where it had laid 4 pear-shaped eggs. None came to enrich my collection as the show before my eyes was too beautiful for me to touch...This very week-end I gave away my modest egg collection to a classmate.

My interest for Nature probably comes from my mother's side, as her 13 brothers and sisters were farmers. In my young years, I therefore helped my uncles on the farm, especially in Lincolnshire, to care for the animals, or to collect hay at the end of the summer, and also at the end of the school breaks. As we were collecting hay, I noticed the presence of some 'spectacular birds', that I didn't know, and that I would have fun at trying to approach, hidden in haystacks. I soon understood they could only be curlews. My uncle's farm was about 2 kilometers only from the coast, and these curlews probably came to rest during the high tide of the Wash, a great estuary of the Eastern Coast of England.

I didn't know then how greatly attached I was to become to Wash and Gibraltar Point. At that time, I was just a boy, with no binoculars, no identification guide for birds, and no TV at home.

I was 15 when I got my first pair of binoculars, in 1956.

My parents were far from rich, nor belonged to the upper class, and I collected the necessary sum mostly by singing Christmas carols, in the evening, standing at the village doors of those who were least poor.