RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Birdwatchingwatching

Alex Horne

Contents

About the Book

ONE MAN AND HIS DAD: A COMICAL TALE OF COMPETITIVE TWITCHING

Comedian Alex Horne’s dad has always been an avid birdwatcher, a fact Alex could never quite come to terms with. But faced with the prospect of becoming a father himself one day, Alex resolved to get to know his own dad better and finally understand why (and how) he does what he does. The best way to bond, he decided, would be some father-versus-son competitive birdwatching. Over the course of one year, they would each attempt to see as many species of bird as possible governed by three basic rules: the birds had to be wild, free and alive; they had to actually *see* the birds; and they could travel anywhere in the world to do it. From Barnet to Bahrain, taking in a twitchy stag-weekend in Wales and an unfortunately birdless trip to the Alps, this is a hilarious and dramatic true story of obsessive behaviour, friendship and fatherhood.

About the Author

Alex Horne's first ever comedy gig came after winning a Christmas Cracker joke-writing competition. Since that inauspicious beginning he has managed to establish a remarkable reputation among critics, comics and audiences as a gifted gagsmith, prolific writer and one of the most creative solo performers at work today. He was nominated for the Perrier Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2003, and in 2004 he won the Chortle award for Best Breakthrough Act. He is married, has met Ken Dodd three times and the Pope once. This is his first book.

Birdwatchingwatching

One Year, Two Men, Three Rules,
Ten Thousand Birds

Alex Horne

For Rachel, Beyoncé and Shakira

Introductions

My dad is a birdwatcher.

That's a sentence I've struggled with for the last twenty years. My dad watches birds, often for hours at a time. Why?

Before I attempt to come up with an answer, there's one thing I need to get sorted right away. This is a book about me and my dad. But it's also about me hypothetically becoming a dad, so I don't really want to refer to my dad as 'dad'. That wouldn't do at all.

I also don't want to call my dad 'Hugh'. That is his name (well, it's his middle name, but for some long forgotten reason everyone calls him Hugh rather than the James his parents intended), but I just can't call my dad by his real name. I'm sorry, but I can't write a book about Hugh when Hugh is actually my dad. And for those of you who are thinking ahead, yes, Hugh Horne is quite a funny name. He's a GP, and so his full title is Dr Hugh Horne, perilously close to Dr Huge Horne, a nickname few of his patients were able to resist. (I should add that I didn't discover that my surname was a euphemism until I was fifteen years old, when a teacher – who was also a priest – got the giggles while reading out the register.)

Thankfully, my dad (that's one of the last times I'll refer to him thus, so enjoy) managed to rename himself without even trying. Like all dads, he's useless with modern technology. He can't text, for example. He tries, but consistently ends up sending messages filled with twenty-

first century Freudian slips, devoid of punctuation, and more often than not using ‘in’ instead of ‘go’ and ‘of’ instead of ‘me’, which isn’t helpful when the text is meant to be about ‘me’ ‘going’ somewhere.

One particular text sent to my brother Chip (we won’t go into his name just yet) was unsurpassed in its ‘dadness’. In capital letters of course, and unintentionally aggressive in tone, but with virtually no mistakes until the final three words:

LOVE FROM DUNCTON

Chip understood what he meant, but this was too good an opportunity to miss. He immediately forwarded the message to his brothers, one of whom (me) phoned up our father and asked why he had signed off his text ‘DUNCTON’?

‘I was trying to write *dad*,’ he offered apologetically. ‘It must be this new predictive texting.’

‘It doesn’t predict that you’re going to use a word that doesn’t exist,’ I countered logically, if a little harshly. ‘That wouldn’t be a helpful system at all.’

But Duncton does exist. It’s a place in Sussex that my dad (that’s the last time) occasionally frequents (you’ve guessed it) for birdwatching purposes. It turned out that he’d typed the word ‘Duncton’ more often than the word ‘dad’, which didn’t make us brothers feel all that good. Still, Duncton he wrote, and so Duncton he became. And from now on, I will refer to him as Duncton, both here, at home, to friends, to family and especially in texts.

So, Duncton is a birdwatcher …

But Duncton was never a particularly fanatical birdwatcher. He didn’t watch birds with any regularity, or belong to any clubs. He didn’t go on birdwatching holidays, attend birdwatching lectures or charter a plane to the Isles of Scilly to catch a glimpse of the UK’s first recorded great blue heron. He was simply an everyday birdwatcher. More

accurately, he's a *birder*. The word 'birdwatcher' sounds too deliberate. It suggests that he only watched birds when on a 'birdwatching trip'. Of course he did go on many such outings, but Duncton didn't devote specific time to birds, he was just constantly aware of them.

So, Duncton is a birder …

I ought to introduce myself properly here too. I'm a comedian. And that's a sentence I've struggled with too, for the last seven years. As soon as you tell someone you're a comedian they ask you one of three things. Have I heard of you? Are you funny? Can you tell me a joke? Only the first of these has a simple answer, and that is no. Unless you have heard of me, in which case the answer is yes. Am I funny? On stage, yes. That's why I'm a comedian. But I'm not funny all the time. That wouldn't be funny. And can I tell you a joke? I could. But I'd prefer to tell you about Duncton.

During my childhood, his hobby manifested itself in small but persistent ways. The tedium of a long journey would be broken by Duncton suddenly squawking, jerking his head round and shouting 'Kestrel! Kestrel!' Kestrels aren't especially rare, but he'd be so excited by the sight of one hovering above the motorway ('It's as though it's dangling on the end of a piece of string!' he'd cry) that he couldn't help but share it with his family, thereby putting us at risk with his erratic driving. On walks over the Downs near our home in West Sussex he would stride far ahead, clutching his binoculars like a child might a cherished bear. We would only catch him up when a particularly indistinct LBJ[1] caught his attention, causing him to stop and stare at what looked to the rest of us like an ordinary bush. Mealtimes at home would be interrupted not by a programme on TV, but by a goldfinch on the bird table.

My ‘Writing Book’ May 1984 aged 5¾.

I didn’t think Duncton’s behaviour abnormal, until my tenth New Year’s Eve party, and a brief moment my parents have probably long forgotten. Perhaps unusually, new year festivities have often been momentous for me. Before I was trusted to go out by myself, they involved a party at one of our friends’ houses in Midhurst, where we lived. Conveniently, every family we knew seemed to have three similarly aged boys, all of whom would spend the evening upstairs, playing games and then fighting, while the adults did what adults did at parties in the late eighties (probably playing games and fighting too) downstairs. I should make it clear that mine wasn’t a scandalous childhood. This is no confessional memoir. The word ‘fighting’ in the previous sentence should really be ‘squabbling’. But there are a couple of confessions I’d like to get off my chest as the story unfolds, and which I’ve never made before. The first is that it was at one of these New Year’s Eve parties that I first got drunk (as opposed to not really liking the taste of alcohol and pretending to be dizzy).

As the gap between the eldest children and youngest adults mysteriously narrowed, the generational groups began to mix more at these get-togethers, so that on one occasion I found myself in the kitchen, fetching my friend Ben's dad Mike a snack. Seeing an open bottle of red wine on the table, and carried away by the occasion, I glugged down a few hearty gulps before returning with a plate of mini cheddars. I then continued to generously offer to distribute food while steadily getting merrier in the kitchen.

There is no dramatic ending to the story. I wasn't sick in front of everyone. I might have had a sore head the next morning, but no more than anyone else. It was probably quite a safe way to experiment with alcohol, and thinking back, my parents almost certainly knew I was getting quietly sozzled and were happy and amused to keep an eye on my progress. At the time, of course, I thought I was being both mature and naughty.

But back to the incident of 31 December 1988. As midnight approached everyone gathered together in the biggest room. There was just time for one last party game before the year ticked over. Someone suggested charades. Someone else suggested a game of charades in which you pretended to be a person in the room. Everyone thought this was a tremendous idea. Like I said, this is not a drugs-hookers-binges memoir.

One of my parents' friends, almost certainly Mike again, spent the next few minutes pretending to be Duncton, to the delight of everyone present. It was the perfect portrayal of the stereotypical twitcher: sleeves rolled up way above the elbow, mimed binoculars repeatedly raised, head cocked, walk stealthy, and then the *pièce de résistance* – he almost exploded when he caught sight of a bird![2] Not, of course, one with wings, but one of my friends' mums – one of the Midhurst birds. This almost took the roof

off the place. ‘It’s Hugh!’ they all shouted and everyone laughed.

And that was it. The moment was soon lost in the confused countdown to the final year of the decade and a rousing chorus of the few words of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ that everyone knew and repeated ad nauseum. But for me, this was a turning point, as pivotal as those first swigs of wine. It was my very first indication that there might be anything odd about being a ‘twitcher’, my first brush with the double meaning of ‘birds’ and the first time I saw that there was something amusing about birdwatching.

From that moment Duncton’s hobby became the focus of my curiosity. As I grew more independent of my parents and did what my friends said was cool, I stopped watching birds and started watching football. But all the while, as Liverpool shrank, Man Utd grew, and I slowly realised I’d backed the wrong horse, Duncton remained a birder. As I lurched through puberty, my emotions towards this eternal paternal birdwatcher moved from shame and embarrassment in my early teens, to pride and amusement as I realised my ‘quirky’ family might make me seem more interesting to girls, then confusion and genuine disbelief as I left school and embarked on my own bird-free adult life. *Why does Duncton watch birds?* When I started making a living out of comedy, this question was always at the back of my mind. I was sure something funny lurked in the answer. If humour comes from incongruity, then birdwatching must be a rich source of material.

Almost two decades after that party, I was twenty-seven years old and rapidly approaching the same age Duncton was when he had me. He would soon be twice as old as I am. That works mathematically. And it hasn’t always been the case – when I was five he wasn’t ten.

On New Year’s Day 2005, I got married. Two days later my wife, Rachel, and I flew to Costa Rica for an unforgettable honeymoon in what seemed to us like

paradise. Before we left, Duncton gave me a small wedding present, a compact pair of RSPB binoculars, nothing fancy, just a lightweight piece of birding equipment so I wouldn't miss the sort of birds he knew I'd have the chance to see in this avian nirvana. By the end of the trip, I'd lost both lens caps, broken the strap and used them more than any other item in our suitcase. Surrounded by iridescent hummingbirds, ridiculous-looking toucans, pelicans diving for fun and fish and love-struck pairs of scarlet macaws, I stopped and looked at birds for the first time in twenty years. I got excited by feathers, my ears pricked involuntarily when I heard an unusual call; I even wrote a list of the species I'd seen, prompted by the sight of a rare bird in the heart of the cloud forest that our guide insisted was called a resplendent quetzal.

Having outgrown the label of newly-wed, and aware that I was nearing the pertinent age discussed above, thoughts and conversations inevitably turned to fatherhood. Rachel and I weren't in any particular rush to have kids but we knew we both wanted to start a family at some point. Naturally, I hope, I was scared. I knew nothing about babies. I had no idea about birth weights and what might be a good one, whether it's ever OK to shake them, and at what age I should reasonably be alarmed if my offspring were not talking. But the one man I wanted to turn to for advice was spending more and more time typing the names of obscure birdwatching sites into his phone and less and less time communicating with his own sons. Recently retired, Duncton was now 'out birding' on an almost daily basis.

There was only one thing for it – I would have to join him.

My plan was simple. Not only would I spend time with Duncton, ask him about fatherhood while attempting to finally understand why he does what he does, but there was also the faint possibility I might 'get into' birdwatching.

For, as well as worrying about my ignorance on the baby front, I was also beginning to fret about not knowing anything about anything. A dad, I thought, should be able to tell his children what things are. That's what mine did for me.

'That,' Duncton would say, as a bright yellow bird fluttered up to the bird table, 'is a grey wagtail.'

'But it's yellow!' we would object.

'Not as yellow as a yellow wagtail,' the oracle would reply.

Unfortunately, very little of that invaluable information sank in. I didn't know the difference between a coot and a moorhen. I was useless. So I immersed myself in the birdwatching books I'd ignored for so long on Duncton's shelves. From the calm journalism of Simon Barnes, Stephen Moss and Mark Cocker to the more impenetrable excitement of Bill Oddie, Dan Koeppel and Kenn Kaufman, I absorbed the history of the hobby, studied the main protagonists and gradually learned to speak the language. Soon, however, it became clear there was only one way I could really get under the skin of birdwatching: by birdwatching.

Tentatively, I asked Duncton if I could join him on his outings. Aware both of the commitment needed to do his hobby justice and my own slightly impatient nature, Duncton suggested a trial period. And so, inspired by the more competitive world of birding in America,[3] I agreed to join him on what would be a first for both of us: A Big Year. From 1 January to 31 December 2006 (exactly the same size as a normal year, only more exciting) we would each attempt to see as many species of bird as possible. The contest appealed to my sense of sport and scale, and while the formality was alien to Duncton's relaxed approach to birding, he was so amazed and excited by his son's new-found enthusiasm that he was more than happy to take part. It was agreed that I would use a small microphone to

record what I hoped would be the hilarious banter bandied about in bird reserves up and down the country[4]. If I was going to spend a year watching birds, I reasoned, I'd have to get at least a couple of funny stories on the way.

This, we agreed, was to be a proper contest, the winner being the man who saw the greatest number of species after twelve months. Several birders have committed their Big Year stories to paper. After an American Jack Kerouac-like figure by the name of Kenn Kaufman kicked things off with a hitchhiking trek across America, immortalised in the great *Kingbird Highway*, bird writers like Mark Obmascik and Sean Dooley followed his footsteps with terrific international Big Year books. But after buying and reading just about every major book about British birdwatching (not about British *birds* – there are about as many books about birds as there are birds themselves), I hadn't actually read the story of a British Big Year until Amazon took it upon itself to recommend one to me.

I was supposed to be buying Christmas presents for my brothers, but Amazon had other ideas and suggested, quite convincingly, that I really ought to invest in *Arrivals and Rivals: A Birding Oddity* written by a birder (and moth expert, taxonomist and scientist) from Harpenden called Adrian M Riley. I'm easily persuaded – Amazon seems to know me very well – and when it arrived I wasn't disappointed. This was exactly what I needed before setting off on my journey. With the subtitle 'A Year of Competitive Twitching', this book, written with raw enthusiasm by a fellow Big Year competitor, would be my reference point, pace setter, compass. Duncton was the man I was trying to both understand and defeat, and Adrian M Riley would show me how.

The rules of our Big Year were simple. We were governed, of course, by the fundamental birdwatching covenant:

•Birds seen must be wild, free and alive
They can't be pets, captives or dead. We couldn't phone up the local Chinese takeaway, order a Peking Duck, and tick off another species. A bird in the hand was not worth two in the bush.

We also added some rules of our own:

•We had to actually see the birds
This may sound obvious, but it is common practice for birdwatchers to tick off birds they can only hear. Such is the knowledge of an even half-decent birdwatcher that they can identify a bird hidden in a grove from its chirping alone. Not so for us. Possessing none of this awareness myself, I would have to actually clap eyes on the creatures for them to be ticked.[5] We also, incidentally, banned the other senses. If one of us could feel and taste a bird, but not see it, that wouldn't count. Clearly this would rarely be relevant, but if Duncton was to fall asleep in the garden and accidentally swallow[6] a goldcrest, he would not be allowed to add that goldcrest to his list, unless he was able to first eject it unharmed, an ugly and unlikely scenario considering the delicacy of the bird (it's the smallest in Europe).

And finally:

• We could travel anywhere in the world to see our birds
Birdwatchers often limit their Big Year to a local patch,[7] be it their country, county or even their garden. Considering that I, a non-birder, lived in northwest London, while Duncton, a birder, had the whole of Sussex to roam around, I made the executive decision to remove border controls from the challenge. This, I thought, was a fairly canny move, given that my job as a stand-up comedian allows me

(well, forces me) to travel extensively. I also knew that in August I would be attending the wedding of a friend of my wife's in Caesarea, Israel, bang in the middle of the migratory route of birds flying south for the winter. I was thinking tactically. I wanted to win this thing.

So that was that. We were ready. And on the morning of my first wedding anniversary I started birdwatching.

1 LBJ is birders' speak for 'Little brown job' – any small brown bush-dwelling species that inexplicably gets a birdwatcher's juices flowing.

2 OK, let's deal with this now: Duncton is not a twitcher. A twitcher is someone whose sole birdwatching aim is to see as many different species of birds as possible in their lifetime. Duncton, as I've said, is a birder, someone interested in seeing the birds in his local area, year in year out, without chasing across the country to 'get' a new species. The term twitcher was coined by one of birdwatching's great pioneers, Howard Medhurst, a.k.a. The Kid. Lacking his own transport, The Kid would often travel for miles on the back of his friend Bob Emmet's motorbike to seek out a rumoured bird, and would frequently arrive so cold and excited that he would, literally, twitch. This happened with such regularity that the burgeoning birdwatching community soon adopted the term 'twitching' to represent the activity of chasing birds around the country.

3 Birdwatching in the United States is now more of a sport than a hobby. On New Year's Day each year, thousands of teams set off on an annual 'Bird Race': 'In a good year the contest offers passion and deceit, fear and courage, a fundamental craving to see and conquer mixed with an unstoppable yearning for victory,' writes Mark Obmascik in *The Big Year*.

4 As it turned out there wasn't an awful lot of hilarious banter It was mostly men sitting in silence, and that silence occasionally broken by someone saying, 'Oh, there's a skylark … Is it? No, it's gone.' But what little there was, I captured!

5 Once, when I was explaining these rules to a friend, I said I would have to 'make eye contact' with the bird. That was not the case. It didn't matter if the bird wasn't watching me watching it.

6 A not unusual example of a bird's name also being a verb. See also *duck, snipe* and *tern*. Common too is the phenomenon of a birding term having some sort of sexual connotation. If you want to play Horne's Birdwatching Euphemism Bingo feel free to do so. Simply underline any word or phrase you encounter that could in any way be construed to be rude, then cross it off the checklist at the back of the book and see if you can get all twenty.

7 A birder's patch is the area he visits most regularly. Whether daily, monthly or annually, this is his haunt and those are his birds.

CHAPTER 1

Fork in the Road

'*Like so many birders, and particularly those trying to compile large year lists, the first morning of January usually heralds the start of a maniacal rush towards the pursuit of filling the pages of one's notebook*.'
– Adrian M Riley, *Arrivals and Rivals: A Birding Oddity*

Alex: 0 species
Duncton: 0 species

1 January

ONE GOOD THING about getting married on New Year's Day is that you'll never forget your wedding anniversary. Well, you shouldn't forget your wedding anniversary. Right up there

with the Fifth of November, it's one of the easiest dates of the year to remember.

One bad thing about getting married on New Year's Day is that you will rarely celebrate your anniversary without at least a small hangover. This was definitely the case on our first such occasion, on the morning of which Rachel and I woke late in the sitting room of a friend's house in Olympia. Only after a good couple of hours and eggs were we able to contemplate the day, let alone the year, ahead.

During the course of the previous night of the previous year, the thorny issue of resolutions had inevitably reared its ugly head. Several of our friends heroically wielded phrases like 'get fit', 'stop smoking' and 'try to get a girlfriend or a foot on the property ladder or generally be less shambolic' in an attempt to make that ugly head turn away. I, however, felt smugger than usual, with my simple promise to 'go birdwatching'. This year I felt sure I'd keep my pledge longer than any of my friends.

After the excitement and expense of the previous year's wedding and honeymoon in Ireland and Costa Rica, we'd decided to spend the first few days of our second year of marriage a little closer to home. So, finally extracting ourselves from our hosts' comfortable, comforting sofa, we set off on a leisurely drive down to Warwickshire where we'd booked a couple of nights in a modest bed and breakfast in the middle of nowhere. As well as my Christmas jumper and spotless walking boots I'd packed a couple of new books. Along with Adrian Riley's account of his Year, I'd nicked my older brother Mat's old 1983 *Collins Bird Guide*, as recommended by both Duncton and the cover quote ('Easily the most authoritative and best illustrated pocket bird book ever published' *Daily Express*). I also had a hardy, pocket-sized writing pad called '*The Alwych All Weather Notebook*'. The Alwych website claims that their 'flexible cover and durability' make these books ideal for birdwatchers, policemen and milkmen,[1] so I

proudly shoved it into my back pocket, determined to fill its light cream pages with my many sightings over the next twelve months.

Unfortunately, our hour-long, New Year's Day journey out of London was as stressful as ever, and not helped by my attempts at spotting my first birds of the year. As we struggled to find our way to the A40, Rachel's patience was tested for the first of what would be many times in 2006 by my proclamations of 'That's a seagull!' which should really have been 'That's definitely the right way to Warwickshire!'

In the driver's seat, I was becoming frustrated with both road and bird signs. It was dawning on me that actually this 'birdwatching lark[2]' might not necessarily be as easy as I'd thought. In the first few hours of the year I'd seen several birds, but not one I could definitively identify. A couple of small brownish ones had flitted past me so quickly they might well have been leaves or Snickers wrappers, one so high up it might have been a plane. And then there was this seagull. It definitely was a seagull. But I knew this wouldn't be enough for Duncton. There are several types of seagull. Which one was this? It was white. Ish. Size-wise it was big. Ish. But then I couldn't really tell how far away it was. It might have been miles away and massive. Or the other way round. And I only had a second or two to glimpse it before taking the wrong exit from that roundabout. Things weren't going well. Even the inevitable pigeon I saw on Shepherd's Bush Green would be entered in my notebook with a question mark later that afternoon. Again, I knew it was a pigeon. Everyone knows what pigeons look like. But what sort of a pigeon? My bird guide listed no fewer than four varieties, as well as about fourteen doves that all looked pretty much the same. It was probably a feral pigeon, but if I was going to commit him to my book I'd have to be completely sure. Any reasonable doubt and I couldn't send him down.

My first official bird was a magpie. Again, everyone knows what a magpie looks like and unlike the pesky pigeon there were only two types of magpie in my guide (the common magpie and the azure-winged magpie). While I didn't know exactly what colour 'azure' was, I was pretty sure this one wasn't. This was definitely a common magpie. My first bird! Unluckily for me, according to British lore this particular bird seen without its mate foretold 'sorrow'.

Thankfully, many years earlier my mum had taught me how to deal with just this situation. I was able to avert misery by saluting the magpie (swiftly and safely) and asking after his wife. That's what my mum has taught me to do. I suppose that constitutes one very basic parenting lesson. My mum is not, incidentally, a birder. She likes birds and knows a lot more about them than me, but she is definitely *not* a birder. She knows the basic species and occasionally even dons binoculars, but she's unquestionably *not* a birder. I've always assumed she likes the fact that Duncton *is* a birder – that he can tell us all what's what on the bird feeder, in the sky or making that racket – but I know she's happy not to share his obsession. Hers is a more measured interest, a natural curiosity rather than an immovable character trait.

Before Duncton and I embarked upon our Big Year, I think Mum and I were each fairly sure I was more like her than him – I was also definitely *not* a birder – so she could watch our birdwatching with amusement as well as her customary encouragement; I was going to discover exactly how it does feel to spend time with a natural born birder. And although I was at first concerned about devoting myself to Duncton and ignoring Mum for a year (a worry that I'm sure I wouldn't have entertained before the prospect of fatherhood appeared on the horizon), as the months passed I found it increasingly reassuring to talk to her about anything other than birds. If I'm at home, it's not the bird table I gravitate towards, it's *Countdown*, *The*

Times crossword or Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*; things that don't necessarily make me 'cool' or 'hard' (no need for the word 'necessarily' there) but that Mum and I have always enjoyed and, I'm sure, always will. I don't really need to spend a year trying to understand her interests, since I share many of them.

I suppose a superstition like saluting magpies comes under that category. And if you quickly have a look in your own reference books you'll see that other ways of forestalling lonesome-magpie-inspired distress include blowing kisses in his direction, asking him the whereabouts of his brother, and keeping your eyes on him until he's out of sight – not a sensible option when driving (a memorable pigeon-obsessed comedian by the name of Phil Zimmerman also suggests carrying round a spare magpie in a plastic bag which one can flourish whenever necessary).

On the occasion of my first bird sighting, my mother's simple method seemed to work. Before long we found our way onto the A40 and sped off towards my birdwatching future.

As we soared through the valley between Junctions 5 and 6 of the M40 – probably my favourite two junctions on any motorway, including the Birmingham Toll Road at night – where Berkshire and Buckinghamshire stretch their legs and you can finally breathe a sigh of relief at having left the city well behind you, my eyes were drawn to what I could only describe as an enormous bloody bird wheeling around above us. I could only describe it thus because at that height, on a clear winter's day, with the sun at its back and to my naked eye, it was little more than a silhouette. A pretty bloody big one at that.

Despite this lack of clarity, and much to my surprise, the words 'That's a red kite!' instantly slipped from my mouth. I was shocked. Rachel told me to concentrate on the road. I glanced up again. It was definitely a red kite. 'Look, you can see its forked tail!' I muttered. Once more Rachel

encouraged me to look ahead rather than up. Something terrifying was happening. Within a matter of hours, I was becoming a birdwatcher.

When we finally arrived in the village of Luddington, I reached straight for my bird guide and looked up red kite. There it was – the forked tail. That must have been my bird!

I phoned Duncton.

'Hi.'

'Chip!'

'No.'

'Alex!'

'Yes. Second time lucky. Not bad. Happy New Year.'

'Yes, Happy New Year. We're all well here. Had a very nice evening last night with the Reynolds. Marion was there, and Pam and Adrian – the usual lot, you know. The Phillips came along. John was there too because he's back from Exeter …'

I didn't have time for this.

'Duncton – I don't have time for this. I saw a bird.'

'Ah! Well done! Whereabouts? What did it look like? What was it?'

Now I had his undivided attention.

'Yes, well, it was on the M40 …'

'Red kite.'

'Quite big …'

'Red kite.'

'Forked tail …'

'Red kite.'

'I was thinking it might be a … Oh yes, a red kite. Well that's that then. Thanks Duncton. Have you had any luck?'

'Well, not really. I think I'm up to about sixteen.'

Later that evening, I contemplated my own grand total of two species. On the one hand, I wasn't doing very well. I couldn't even confidently identify a pigeon. On the other, acting on instinct, I had managed to spot a red kite in a split second from a long way away. And in the moments

that followed I'd thought to myself, I can do this! I'm a birdwatcher! This is easy!

As I drifted off to sleep, I realised this probably wasn't a birdwatching miracle. Recollections of other long ago journeys west drifted by, and Duncton's familiar voice shouting, 'Forked tail! Red kite!' The image of that kite had been stamped on my brain a long time ago. Duncton's birdwatching habits had made some impression on me. But how ingrained was it? What would come flooding back when I got out in the field? Was birdwatching like riding a bike? Or was it like flying a plane, training for several years, then sitting a vast array of tests, and even then taking continual examinations to maintain the required level of skill and knowledge?

2 January

My first birdwatching outing of the year was a disaster. Not a full-scale disaster, but a personal debacle at the very least.

Rachel and I like walking, so even without my birdwatching challenge we probably would have gone on a 'good walk' on the second day of our break. The only difference was that this time I was carrying a bird guide and some binoculars. Would this be a case of a 'good walk' ruined?

During the first five or six years of my life, apparently, barely a day passed without me staring in wonder at something with wings. This seems odd to me now but I do remember thinking golden eagles were my absolute favourite bird. I'm sure I didn't really know anything about them but they sounded tremendous so I liked them. A little bit like Liverpool and fish and chips.

As we headed through Ilmington towards Meon Hill, the first bird we encountered was in the garden of a typically quaint Warwickshire cottage. Atop a pristine dovecote was a white dove. We admired it for a while, I scribbled its details down, and we carried on walking.

A few doors later we came to a fairly posh allotment, run, it seemed, by various chickens. Lots of various chickens. Some brown, some black, some white – even an auburn one, according to my notes. Again I took down their particulars. This wasn't so bad.

Then, at the foot of the hill itself we found a pond, romantically called The Dingle. 'Wow,' I said, 'look at all those birds.' Rachel wasn't necessarily impressed but we

did indeed look at all those birds. ‘Ducks and a goose’ I wrote in my book, pretty pleased with myself. I even counted them. ‘About 200 of the former and just the one of the latter, running,’ I scrawled in what I thought was really quite scientific language. I should make it clear that the point of the Big Year was not to count individual birds but different species. There are, after all, an estimated 500 million birds in the UK, about eight for each person. I knew I didn’t need to say how many ducks and geese I’d seen, but I was getting into this observation thing.

What I didn’t know just yet, however, was that not one of these birds would count on my list. When I took out my bird guide over a spot of lunch at the summit of Meon Hill, I was hugely disappointed and just a bit humiliated not to find any of the birds I’d seen listed in the index.

White doves and chickens are captive birds, the first a pet, the second a meal, both contradicting rule number one of our birdwatching code. Most ducks aren’t captive, but I had still got it wrong. I hadn’t realised that a duck was a *type* of bird, not a *species*. As we’d gazed down on The Dingle, Rachel had actually said, ‘Those are mallards,’ to which, regrettably, I’d snapped, ‘No, they’re ducks.’ Again, I am embarrassed now, but I hadn’t realised mallards were ducks. ‘Mallards’ would have counted. ‘Ducks’ didn’t.

Finally, ‘a goose’. Again, not specific enough. It was, in fact, a Canada goose, but at this early stage of the year I didn’t know such detail was needed. In real life (well, human life – bird life is of course real, but at the same time, it’s not *really* real life …) I find it almost impossible to tell Canadians from Americans (usually the former are a bit quieter but even that’s not always the case). If I’d known I’d had to give the nationality of every bird as well as its species I might never have undertaken the mission so readily.

On my despondent way down the hill I did see my first blackbird of the year, but even that was soon jeopardised

by the sighting of another bird that was also black but definitely wasn't a blackbird. I started to doubt that the first one had been a blackbird. Surely, if there's more than one type of bird that is black, calling one a blackbird is unfair on the rest?[3]

And this second 'black bird' was blacker than the blackbird! The blackbird's beak was orange! This one's was, yes, black! Ridiculous. To me this represented bad planning on the part of the original namer of birds. If there were only ten different species, each one a different colour, then it might have been reasonable to name each one by its colour and the word 'bird'. But there aren't. There are loads of different species of bird, and little variation in colour. I hastily sketched this black bird, and got in a bit of a huff. And the two flitting brown things that disappeared as soon as I raised my binoculars didn't help that huff. 'Two brownbirds' I noted indignantly.

Even the moorhen and coot conveniently bobbing along the stream near our hotel did little to perk me up. I was glad to finally work out which was which (mooR hens have Red beaks, cooTs whiTe, that's how I remember it now), but I couldn't help thinking the few birds I had ticked off were the ones seen by us all everyday. I didn't feel as though I'd made any progress at all.

3 January

I pondered this early rut with our friends Phill and Fiona on our third and final day in Warwickshire. We'd met them for lunch and a wander round their local town, Luddington, and birdwatching proved to be a fecund topic of conversation. I've discovered that no matter how far removed they think they are from the hobby everyone has something to say about birds. Whether you have a twitching uncle, live near a bird reserve or occasionally

feed the ducks, birdwatching will at some point or another stick its beak into your life.

Phill is quite a romantic sort of chap. He directs plays and is passionate about the good things in life. Birdwatching, he told us theatrically, was good for the soul. In an excited and quite high voice he told me about a sparrowhawk he'd seen over Christmas. I asked him how he knew it was a sparrowhawk. He told me it looked a bit like a hawk and a bit like a sparrow.

Fiona, meanwhile, said she thought birdwatching was like trainspotting.

Pausing by the lock behind a church, we watched two swans swim stoically past. I got out my notebook and jotted down 'Two swans on the Luddington Lock'. Maybe Fiona was right (my soul certainly didn't feel markedly improved).

They were, in fact, mute swans. You do occasionally find whooper swans and Bewick's swans in the UK, but if it's got an orangey beak with an odd black nubbin affair on the top, then you're looking at a mute swan. And yes, I know it's noisy – honking or hissing, depending on its mood – but it's definitely a mute swan. Most swans in Britain are mute swans.

Some people are terrified of swans on account of the rumour put about, I guess, by the swans, that they can and will break your arm in an instant. Every schoolboy knows that at the slightest provocation a swan will get you in a headlock, give you a Chinese burn then snap your upper limb in two. Many people also think that swans are beautiful birds. But what people like best is the tremendously anachronistic fact that The Queen Owns Them All! Lucky Queen! And she can eat them too, something she does as often as possible. 'Swan soup, your Majesty?' 'Yum yum, James!' is, I suspect, a typical exchange between the Queen and her head waiter (James) most evenings in the palace.

Two other sightings of note that morning were a canoeist, braving the swan-infested waters, and a colourful duck that wasn't a mallard. The trouble was that they were sitting side by side on the water, so to have a good look at the bird meant staring hard at the now self-conscious novice. In the end, the situation became too much for everyone and we scurried off. I couldn't say what I'd seen. A shelduck maybe? A pochard? Who knows? Not me.

After a brave final lunch of ox's cheek and calf's liver in Lower Quinton (an interesting combination but on balance, I'd rather have had ham and chips), Rachel and I looked, once more, for the M40, this time to head back to London and our normal lives. Picking our way across the countryside, we were to have our final birding incident of the trip.

Rounding the corner on to a straight stretch of road, yearning for a sign to help us on our way, our eyes fell upon a large shape sitting right in our path, a hundred or so yards ahead. 'It's a goose,' I said. 'Canada goose,' Rachel corrected me. We were both wrong.

I slowed down to get a closer look and protect the car. It wasn't a goose. It was more like a griffin. 'What *is* that?' cried Rachel, not taking her eyes off the beast. It was then that I realised Duncton was right about one aspect of birdwatching. To be a proper dad I needed to know these things. One day it wouldn't be Rachel asking me, but a smaller version of Rachel in the seat behind her. And right now, I didn't have a clue.

The mythical bird turned towards us and stared us down. Even he could tell I didn't know what he was. I looked away and groped around behind me for my binoculars and bird guide only to discover I'd amateurishly stowed both away in the boot. Before I could start to manoeuvre over seats and towards the rear of the vehicle, the brutish creature spread his bulky wings, flopped over the hedge, and disappeared.

On our way back to Kensal Green, Rachel and I compared notes. We both agreed it was sort of a mottled brown colour and quite tufty. ‘It had big, chunky legs,’ said Rachel. ‘It looked hairy and arrogant,’ I added. Back home I wasn’t allowed to look at the bird guide till we’d unpacked and when I finally turned to the ‘Birds of Prey’ section I saw, to my dismay, that the most likely candidate was a red kite. The image fitted – I hadn’t seen the forked tail this time, but it was mottled and brown and the legs were definitely furry. What’s more, all the other details fitted perfectly. It was dining on some carrion left on the road, and that road was close to the M40, where kites tend to dwell.

But then again, it might not have been a red kite! It could have been an imperial eagle! They are also big and tufty and fairly hairy and arrogant.

The more I looked at the picture of the imperial eagle, the more convinced I became that this was exactly what I’d seen. It wasn’t particularly red, and it was especially imperial. It might even have been a vulture! After all, it was big. As big as a dog, at least. And a big dog too – not a spaniel – one of those large terrifying ones. Or a small horse. A small, terrifying horse.

I closed the book. In my heart of hearts I knew it was almost certainly a red kite. I’d already ‘got’ a red kite. But there was still a chance that it was, in fact, something spectacular. A genuine birdwatching find. A golden eagle maybe. Or a condor. It was my responsibility, I felt, to learn these things. Not just for me, not just for my hypothetical children, but for the birdwatchers, for the birds, for Britain.

4 January

Kensal Green is an idiosyncratic segment of London, trapped between the rough reputations of Harlesden and Kilburn and the more trendy expensive likes of Queen’s