

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Red Sky at Night

Jane Struthers



CONTENTS

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Title Page
Dedication
Foreword

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

What Do You Call a ...?
As Mad as a March Hare
Bee Lore
Which Flowers Make the Best Honey?
The Life of a Butterfly
Horse Talk
When is a Mule not a Mule?
A Pig of a Tale
The Lifecycle of Frogs
Oh! Deer!
Going Bats
When the Wild Wolves Went

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

An Aviary of Birds
Strictly for the Birds
Swanning Around
Wise Old Owls
Common British Birds

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Britain's Native Trees
How to Tell the Age of an Oak Tree
Lighting a Fire Without Matches
The Clean Air Act
Staying Warm in the Snow
A-foraging we will go

UP THE GARDEN PATH

A Bee-Filled Garden
How to Attract Butterflies and Moths into Your Garden
Building the Perfect Bonfire
Edible Flowers
Growing Herbs
Companion Plants
Making a Scarecrow
Turning Animal Manure into Fertiliser
Creating a Compost Heap
Wormy Facts

WHATEVER THE WEATHER

How to Avoid Being Struck by Lightning
How to Predict the Weather
The Beaufort Wind Scale
Weather Lore

COASTING ALONG

Miles of Isles
What are Kippers?
Flotsam and Jetsam
Lighting up the Coast

SUPERSTITIONS

How to Find your True Love
How to Keep Evil Spirits out of your Garden
Which Way to Hang a Horseshoe

Fairy Rings
Bird Superstitions
Old Wives' Tales

FUN AND GAMES

How to make a Fighting Conker
Welly-wanging and other Country Pursuits
Making and Using a Flower Press
Pooh Sticks
The Rules of Ferret Racing
Morris Dancing

THE STARRY HEAVENS

Shine on, Harvest Moon
The Twenty-Five Brightest Stars in the Night Sky
Celestial Navigation
Starry Stories

SNUG INDOORS

The Joys of a Log Fire
The Best Woods for Burning Indoors
Draught Dodging
Mothproofing your Clothes

IN THE KITCHEN

Baking your own Bread
The Perfect High Tea
Is this Egg Fresh?
Making your Own Yoghurt
Pudding? Yes, Please!
The Creamiest Rice Pudding
Boiled Fruit-Cake
The Ploughman's Lunch
Some Traditional Food and Drink
How to Skin a Rabbit

A WELL STOCKED LARDER

The Best Bitter Orange Marmalade

In a Jam

Dried Apricot Jam

Strawberry Jam

Blackcurrant Jam

How to Make Rosehip Syrup

Making your own Liqueurs

Buttering Up

Storing Vegetables

Storing Fruit

Making Brawn

Curing Pork

Preserving Welsh Mutton Hams

THE TURNING OF THE YEAR

The Quarter Days

The Twelve Months

British Feast Days

The Special Days of the Year

Birth Days

TRADITIONS

How to Thatch a Roof

Building a Dry-Stone Wall

Tally-ho!

Sheepdog Calls

British Patron Saints

Where did St George Slay the Dragon?

County Nicknames

Tickling a Trout

Gardening by the Moon

Well-dressing

Home Remedies

Reading Tea Leaves

Wassail!

Keeping Christmas
Weekly Washday

COUNTRY CRAFTS

Making your Own Potpourri
Getting Hooked on Rag Rugs
Hand-dipped Candles
A Quilt Trip
A Glass of Country Wine
Brewing your Own Beer
Making your Own Cider

IN ANCIENT TIMES

Roman Britain
Hill Figures
Stone Circles
In Search of King Arthur

Epilogue
Index
Acknowledgements
Copyright

About the Book

Ever wondered how to predict the weather just by looking at the sky?

Or wanted to attract butterflies to your garden?

Is there a knack to building the perfect bonfire?

And how exactly do you race a ferret?

In this world of traffic tailbacks, supermarket shopping and 24-hour internet access, it's easy to feel disconnected from the beauty and rhythms of the natural world.

If you have ever gazed in awe at stars in the night's sky, tried to catch a perfect snowflake or longed for the comfort of a roaring log fire, then this is the book for you. From spotting Britain's five kinds of owl to gardening by the phases of the moon, and from curing a cold to brewing your own ale, *Red Sky at Night* is packed with instructions and lists, ancient customs and old wives' tales, making it an indispensable guide to countryside lore.

About the Author

Jane Struthers lives in rural East Sussex. A professional writer, she shares her 17th-century cottage and organic garden with her husband and two cats.

RED SKY AT NIGHT

THE BOOK OF LOST
COUNTRYSIDE WISDOM

Jane Struthers



*In memory of Bert Tanner, my great-uncle and godfather,
who loved the countryside*



FOREWORD

When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather.

DR SAMUEL JOHNSON

BRITAIN HAS MANY traditions, but this is one of the most sacrosanct. How else can we get through those awkward silences that have a habit of springing up? Besides, the weather changes so frequently in Britain that there is usually something to say about it. Most of us rely on official weather forecasts to tell us what to expect, but in the days before television, radio and even newspapers, it was essential to be able to predict the weather oneself. Farmers, sailors and other people whose livelihoods – and possibly even their lives – depended on the weather were expert at reading the sky and noticing other indications of changing conditions.

Today, the ability to predict the weather by sniffing the air, looking at the clouds and observing the activity of insects is fast disappearing. Our lives are so hectic that we often don't have the time to notice what's going on around us. Many other aspects of country knowledge are being lost, too, as we become more disconnected from our surroundings.

Red Sky at Night is rich in the countryside wisdom that once we knew so well. It's a miscellany of information about the countryside and its lore, from the sensible to the fanciful, from the superstitious to the factual, that was once

common knowledge but is now being forgotten. Here are the notions, beliefs, rules and facts that our forefathers lived by. They offer a link to a way of life that's gentle, measured, and governed by the rhythms of the seasons and the turning points of the year. They include recipes, instructions, lists, collections, stories, histories, ideas, calendars, traditions and many other things that I hope will inspire you, make you think or conjure up fascinating images of a lost world.

Jane Struthers
East Sussex
St David's Day 2009

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Animals are such agreeable friends – they ask no questions,
they pass no criticisms.

‘MR GILFIL’S LOVE STORY’, GEORGE ELIOT

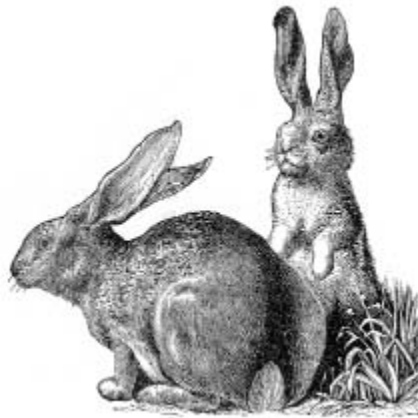


WHAT DO YOU CALL A ...?

SOME ANIMALS HAVE special names, according to whether they're male, female or very young. So if you don't know that a tercel or a squab is, this is your chance to find out.

Animal	Male	Female	Young
Badger	Boar	Sow	Kit, cub
Bat	Male	Female	Pup
Bee	Drone	Queen, worker	Larva
Bird	Cock	Hen	Chick
Boar	Boar	Sow	Farrow
Cat	Tom	Queen	Kitten
Cattle	Bull	Cow	Calf
Chicken	Rooster	Hen	Chick
Deer	Buck, stag	Doe, hind	Faun
Dog	Dog	Bitch	Puppy, whelp
Donkey	Jackass	Jenny	Colt, foal
Duck	Drake	Duck	Duckling
Falcon	Tercel	Falcon	Eyas, chick
Ferret	Hob	Jill	Kit
Fox	Dog	Vixen	Cub
Frog	Male	Female	Tadpole
Goat	Billy	Nanny	Kid
Goose	Gander	Goose	Gosling
Hare	Buck, jack	Doe, jill	Leveret
Hawk	Tercel	Haggard	Eyas, chick
Hedgehog	Male	Female	Hoglet
Horse	Stallion	Mare	Foal
Mink	Boar	Sow	Cub
Mouse	Buck	Doe	Pup
Peafowl	Peacock	Peahen	Peachick
Pig	Boar	Sow	Piglet
Pigeon	Cock	Hen	Squab
Porpoise	Bull	Cow	Calf
Rabbit	Buck	Doe	Bunny
Rat	Buck	Doe	Pup
Seal	Bull	Cow	Pup
Sheep	Ram	Ewe	Lamb
Spider	Male	Female	Spiderling
Squirrel	Buck	Doe	Pup
Swan	Cob	Pen	Cygnet
Turkey	Tom	Hen	Poult
Weasel	Jack	Jill	Kit

AS MAD AS A MARCH HARE ...



IF YOU'VE HEARD the phrase 'mad as a March hare', you may have wondered what it means. What exactly are March hares, and why are they mad?

☞ Boxing matches ☞

Hares are a fairly rare sight in the British countryside, although that might be because from a distance they can be confused with rabbits. But not so each March and April, when hares behave in ways that have led to them affectionately being labelled as mad. That's because each spring, in addition to chasing one another and leaping around, hares have boxing matches with each other. There is some debate about whether it is only male hares (bucks) that do this, or whether female hares (does) join in as well. Originally, boxing hares were thought to be two bucks sparring over a doe, but it is now believed they involve a doe fending off the unwanted advances of a buck because she isn't yet ready to mate with him. Perhaps this is her

way of hitting her unwelcome admirer round the head with her handbag.

☞ Types of British hare ☞

There are two breeds of hare in Britain. The brown hare (*Lepus europaeus*) occupies lowland areas of arable land and open grassland in England, Wales and Scotland, but is very rarely seen in Ireland. These animals are active during the morning and evening, but literally lie low during the day – they like to stretch out in fields, with their ears laid flat along their backs, in shallow depressions known as forms. They have brown coats, long ears (much longer than a rabbit's) with black tips, and long back legs.

The mountain or blue hare (*Lepus timidus*) lives in the Scottish Highlands, keeping well out of the way of potential predators such as eagles. This hare's coat changes colour according to the season: it's brown in the summer, white in the winter to provide camouflage against the snow, and bluish in the spring and autumn because the brown of the summer coat mingles with the white of its winter fur.



BEE LORE

BEES ARE AMONG the busiest creatures in our gardens and in the wild, and also some of the most important because they pollinate so many plants. In years gone by, many gardeners kept their own beehives, which provided a welcome supply of honey that could be used in many different ways. For instance, the honey was eaten and the wax coating on the combs was made into candles. In return, there was a strict etiquette in looking after bees and many people still practise it, with excellent results.

☞ Informing the bees ☞

Bees were once often referred to as 'little servants of God' or 'small messengers of God', names which meant they had to be accorded due respect. One of the most important tasks of any beekeeper was to keep his or her bees informed of the latest news, because they were part of the family and it was only polite to keep them up to date. If someone died, the bees had to be told, often by someone tapping gently on their hive with a front-door key and then explaining what had happened. If you failed to tell the bees about a death, the penalties could be severe. At the very least, the hive might swarm and vanish. Much worse, there might be another death in the family. In some parts of the country, the hive was draped in black crêpe to signify mourning.

But bees weren't only told about the bad news. They were also informed when there was something to celebrate, such as a wedding or christening, and a small slice of the

cake would be left outside their hive for them to feed on. Some people also tied a white ribbon to the hive. Once again, the consequences of failing to notify the bees were serious. The bees might fly away, or bad luck might befall the family. If the bees weren't told about the birth of a child, there was a danger that the child might sicken or even die. The bees might follow suit, through grief at not being kept up to date with the family news.

☞ Humming ☞

The noise that the bees made was highly significant. Silence from the hive was a warning that the bees might soon swarm. On the other hand, if there was a contented buzzing, all was well. It was considered highly inadvisable to swear near the hive, in case you offended the bees and they abandoned the hive in disgust. If you had to move the hive, it was wise to avoid doing so on Good Friday, once again for fear of upsetting the bees.



☞ Acquiring the bees ☞

How did you acquire your hive in the first place? You had to do it tactfully, so as not to hurt the bees' feelings. It wasn't a good idea to buy the bees, but if you had no choice, it was advisable to hand over the money (usually a gold coin) discreetly, well away from the hive. Better still was to exchange the hive for something useful, such as some

wheat. But not even the wisest precautions were any good if the bees weren't told they were going to have a new master or mistress. Such a lack of consideration could result in the death of the bees. You might think this practice has long since died out, but in fact it's still performed in some parts of the countryside. And according to the people who take care of their bees in this way, it works perfectly.



WHICH FLOWERS MAKE THE BEST HONEY?

BEEES TAKE THE pollen from all sorts of different flowers and plants to make honey, with varying results. Some flowers make much nicer honey than others. For instance, it is claimed that honey made from oil seed rape is bitter and highly crystallised. Here are some good varieties to try.

Type of honey	Taste	Colour
Acacia blossom	Lightly floral and sweet	White to light amber
Clover	Delicate	White to light amber
Heather	Floral, with a strong flavour and aftertaste	Dark amber
Lavender	Lavender	Mid amber
Orange blossom	Fragrantly citrus	Light to dark amber
Rosemary	Herby	Light amber
Thyme	Herby	Dark amber
Wildflowers	Depends on the mix	Medium amber



THE LIFE OF A BUTTERFLY

OF ALL THE insects, butterflies and moths go through the most remarkable transformations in their relatively short lives. If they were ever to have family reunions it's highly unlikely that they would recognise one another because they undergo four very different stages during their existence. It puts an entirely new spin on those irritating words so often uttered by older relatives to small children, such as 'My, how you've changed! I wouldn't have known you.'

☞ The egg ☞

The first stage for a butterfly or moth is when a female lays her eggs. These are sticky, so they will adhere to the specific form of plant life best suited to the needs of the larva (better known as the caterpillar) that emerges. Unless the species is the type whose eggs overwinter, this egg stage only lasts about one week before the caterpillar develops.

☞ The caterpillar ☞

The caterpillar's main aim is to feed, so it can store as much energy as possible to sustain it through its next stage. This is why caterpillars can be such a menace in the garden, such as the caterpillars of the cabbage white butterfly, which have such a fondness for our carefully nurtured brassicas. During this stage, the caterpillar undergoes a series of stages that are called instars. It

moults towards the end of each instar, shedding its old cuticle and growing a new one. It also begins the slow process of growing wing discs that will eventually turn into the proper wings of a butterfly. At the time of the final instar, these wing discs become much bigger and more developed.

☞ The pupa ☞

After about one month, when all these instars have been completed, the caterpillar is ready to move on to the next stage. It finds somewhere safe in which to hide, sometimes attaching itself to a plant stem, while it forms a pupa (also known as a chrysalis). After a few days, the caterpillar's skin dries out and falls off, revealing the chrysalis. If you look at it closely, you can see the outlines of the butterfly's eyes, tongue, legs and wings. Although it may seem inert, a complete transformation is taking place inside the chrysalis.

☞ The butterfly ☞

When everything is ready, after between two and three weeks of pupation, the chrysalis splits and the nascent butterfly wriggles free. It perches on a leaf or twig to wait while its wings dry and expand, and the blood begins to flow through them properly. It is then ready to fly, to feed on nectar through its long, tube-like tongue and, most importantly, to mate so the entire process can start again.

HORSE TALK



THE WORLD OF horses has its own complex language which you need to master if you want to tell your dam from your dray. Even the colours of horses' coats require a special vocabulary.

☞ Colours ☞

Describing the colour of a horse's coat is a lot more complicated than it first seems. Here are some of the most common colours, although there are many more.

**B
a
y** Red-brown body with black 'points' (black mane, tail and lower legs, and black tips of the ears). The variations within this category include light bay (light red coat), blood bay (bright red coat) and dark bay (very dark red or brown). Whatever the colour of the coat, a bay always has black points.

Chestnut Reddish coat, with the mane and tail the same colour

- or lighter. Variations include sorrel (coppery red) and liver chestnut or brown (very dark brown coat).
- Grey** White, or black and white, coat with a dark skin, especially noticeable around the eyes and muzzle. The coat will lighten with age.
- Palomino** Yellow, tan or golden coat with a pale blond or white mane and tail.
- Roan** White hairs intermingled with those of any other dark colour, except on the head, mane, tail and lower legs. The coat does not lighten with age.

🐾 Age 🐾

Tradition tells us that you can tell the age of a horse by looking at its teeth – assuming that you feel brave enough. Luckily, this isn't always necessary. Horses that take part in competitions in the northern hemisphere are considered to become one year older each 1 January (which means they're all honorary Capricorns). So even if a horse is only six months old on 1 January it's considered to be one year old from that date. Horses competing in the southern hemisphere have another year added to their age each 1 August (so they're all honorary Leos). The only exception to this rule is in endurance riding (a long-distance sport) in which the horse's exact age is used.

Horses are given different names according to their age, and also according to the sport in which they may be involved.

Foal A horse of either sex less than twelve months old.

Yearling A horse of either sex between one and two years old.

Colt A male horse less than four years old. (British horseracing extends this to five years old.)

Filly A female horse less than four years old. (British

horseracing extends this to five years old.)

Stallion A non-castrated male horse over four years old.

Gelding A castrated male horse over four years old.

Mare A female horse over four years old.

Horseracing

There are two main types of horseracing in Britain, each of which has its own racecourses.

Flat races Races run on a level surface, at distances varying from 5 furlongs (1,006 m) to more than 2 miles (3,219 m). These are divided into two categories:

Conditions races – classic and local races.

Handicap races – daily races in which horses are given handicaps (weights to carry) according to their abilities.

National Hunt races Races in which horses have to jump hurdles or fences (may also be referred to as steeplechasing). Occasionally there are also National Hunt flat (or bumper) races in which jump horses are trained to race one another on a level surface before beginning their careers as National Hunt horses.



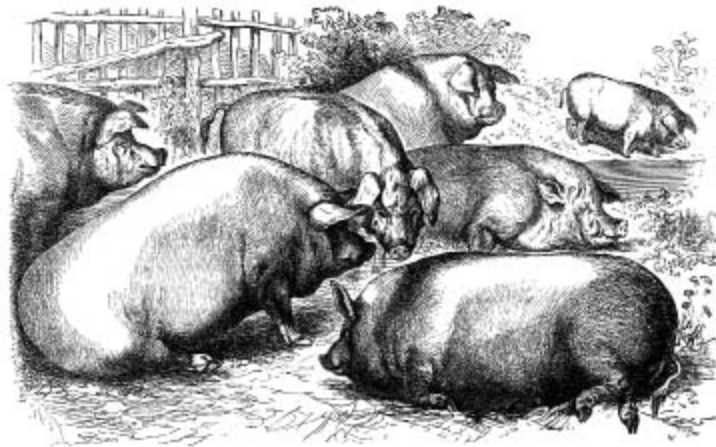
WHEN IS A MULE NOT A MULE?

STRICTLY SPEAKING, A mule isn't a mule when it's a hinny. But what is a mule in the first place? And what, then, is a hinny?

A mule is the hybrid animal produced when a male donkey (a jackass) mates with a female horse (a mare). A hinny, on the other hand, is the product of a male horse (a stallion) mating with a female donkey (a jenny). Hinnies are more rare than mules.

Mules and hinnies are usually sterile because of a discrepancy between the number of chromosomes in horses and donkeys: horses have sixty-four chromosomes but donkeys have only sixty-two. When a male donkey does successfully mate with a female horse (at which point she is referred to as a 'molly'), each resulting mule has sixty-three chromosomes.

A PIG OF A TALE



ALTHOUGH THE FOURTEEN pedigree breeds of pigs in Britain include breeds that originated in other parts of the world, some traditional breeds are thoroughly British. Sadly, some have been lost completely, not least because of government policies that deliberately reduced what was then a healthy diversity of pig breeds into only three breeds (the Large White, Landrace and Welsh) or, as was preferred, a single type of pig that would be suitable for commercial production. Among the breeds that were lost for ever were the Cumberland, the Dorset Gold Tip, the Lincolnshire Curly Coated, the Ulster White and the Yorkshire Blue. The Essex Saddleback and the Wessex Saddleback were crossed to create a new breed known as the British Saddleback. For a while, it looked as though the other traditional breeds would go the same way but, happily, their decline is now slowly being reversed although they are still considered to be at risk.

Here are some of them, in all their glory.

🐷 Berkshire 🐷

This is a traditional British pig although, as a result of cross-breeding with Chinese and Siamese breeds, the Cromwellian soldiers who enjoyed eating its bacon during the English Civil War would no longer recognise it. Today's Berkshire has black skin, white socks and pricked-up ears.

🐷 British Saddleback 🐷

This is a relatively new breed, created in 1967 by crossing the Essex and Wessex Saddlebacks. It has black skin and lop ears, with a white band that encompasses the area around its front legs and shoulders. The sows are known to make good mothers and are very hardy, so they enjoy the outdoor life.

🐷 Gloucestershire Old Spot 🐷

Of all the pedigree pigs, this is the breed that has become best known in recent years. As its name implies, it is noted for its big, black splotches, which stand out on its white body. These pigs have always been popular in Gloucestershire, where they once liked to graze in apple orchards, snuffling up all the windfalls. They are resilient and hardy, and are happiest living outdoors.

🐷 Large Black 🐷

This breed has the distinction of being the only all-black pig in Britain. It has lop ears and is another very hardy creature. What's more, the sows make excellent mothers. Although the fashion for coloured pigs has declined in recent years, the Large Black's exceptional meat means it's once again bred for its eating qualities.

☞ Middle White ☞

The Middle White is an offshoot of the Large White breed, and was only recognised as such in 1852 when judges at a Yorkshire agricultural show noticed that some of the pigs seemed smaller than the rest. However, they weren't so small that they belonged to the Small White breed, and so they were named the Middle Breed. They make good eating and in the early 20th century were popularly known as the 'London Porker'. Although they declined in popularity later in the century, they are once again highly valued for their meat. Several chefs claim that the Middle White makes the best crackling.

☞ Oxford Sandy and Black ☞

This breed, sometimes known as the 'Plum Pudding Pig' because of its random black splotches on a sandy skin, was once a particular favourite of cottagers and farmers and is thought to have existed for at least two hundred years. Despite this claim to fame, it nearly became extinct in the 20th century, but its numbers are slowly starting to increase again.

☞ Tamworth ☞

With its pricked-up ears and long snout, the Tamworth bears the closest resemblance to the Old English Forest Pig from which it has descended. It has a pink skin with sandy-gold hair, and has an inquisitive nature. It likes the outdoor life and was often kept by cottagers, especially in the Midlands. When its numbers looked dangerously close to extinction from the 1970s onwards, several boars were imported from Australia for breeding purposes. The breed became world-famous in 1998 when two pigs (dubbed the