CONDRY LECTURE October 1st, 2016, MoMA, Machynlleth, Powys

I regard it as a huge honour to be speaking to you all gathered here, and I welcome all of you to my talk. I am of course delighted that Penny Condry is with us tonight.

Having spent most of my working life writing, editing and serving as a consultant or researcher on popular natural history books, I thought it high time at the age of 71 to turn my attention to my early years. I started out from a very young age being passionate about birds and other wildlife and never forgot my upbringing in a beautiful part of North Wales and my apprenticeship as a naturalist – both self-taught and inspired by others.

I will be talking tonight mainly about the birds of north-east Wales – and their watchers – of the parish of Dyserth in the beautiful Dyffryn Clwyd – the Vale of Clwyd – where I had the great good fortune to have grown up from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. The village, famous for the waterfall plunging into its heart, nestles along the west and north sides of Moel Hiraddug, one of the most northerly of the hills of Bryniau Clwyd, the Clwydian Hills. The landscape and wildlife of this area, and those who shared my passion for it, will form the core of my forthcoming book.

Writing a memoir of any sort brings questions about memory, both mine and that of other people. I thought that my boyhood trip to Ynys Enlli (Bardsey Island) was in 1957 when I was 12, when a Summer Tanager, a grossly off-course North American migrant, visited the island: the only time this species has occurred this side of the Atlantic. It turned out that I didn't visit then but four years later, a clear example of the potency of wishful thinking. There will be many other cases where I shall need to hunt down confirmation of what my memory says. This always puts me in mind of one of my favourite beginnings of all, in the opening paragraph of Dylan Thomas's short story *A Child's Christmas in Wales*: "… I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six."

The working title of my book, *Now and Then*, refers to the changes in the state of wildlife and landscape of my corner of Wales. It also reflects the fact that I am something of a now and then person, in that I have many interests, from singing to cooking, and from gardening to art. But my most abiding passion has always been natural history, especially ornithology, and the need to write and talk about it.

This is how I thought I might open my first chapter, setting the scene so to speak. It is May and I am climbing a steep slope covered with short wiry grass and studded with tiny rockrose flowers of an intense yellow. Ahead of me I keep an eye on the undulating ridge with scattered gorse bushes ablaze with more egg-yellow flowers against a blue sky.

I stop to catch my breath. Once, I would have run up here and then along the top of Moel Hiraddug, but the passing of time has prevented me from repeating such boyhood feats. At last I am up, huffing and puffing, and I sink gladly onto a hummock of grass to take in the view. On a clear morning like this I can see for many miles across the valley, across a patchwork of fields and small woods to the next range of hills and in the distance the mountains of Snowdonia. This was my vista, my parish, my realm, and still is the place I love more than any other on earth. The most obvious change I notice results from the reduction in sheep, cattle and goat grazing on the gentler slopes of the eastern side. This was essentially (to use the Welsh word for this zone) ffridd, or mountain pasture, but ecological succession has resulted in a dense scrub of ash and hawthorn and elder and a great increase in gorse. As I force my way stooping through a near impenetrable tunnel of this vegetation, a vicious bramble stem sweeps my spectacles off my nose and nearly has my eye out. There are more birds here than there would have been in my childhood: Long-tailed Tits, Willow Warblers and other songbirds that find shelter and nest sites in the dense cover. And I also meet two much larger birds that I am particularly glad to find, as guttural croaks and wild ringing cries prompt me to look up to where high above a pair of Ravens are harrying a Buzzard. In my day, Ravens were an occasional treat and Buzzards an

extreme rarity, both having been prevented from living here by gamekeepers and landowners.

Although this account mentions gains, loss is inevitably the major theme as the landscape of my local patch has suffered from agricultural improvement and other development, and much of the richness of wildlife that I cherished has vanished as a result. In addition, though, a central event in my narrative – a pivot around which I will arrange various themes – is another, more strictly personal loss: the loss of all my notes. Over 10 years of meticulously kept often daily observations, drawings, maps, censuses and so on all vanished during a period of upheaval when I had to travel unexpectedly to Spain, where I lived for several months. When I returned, the people to whom I had entrusted my London flat had been replaced by others, and in the end I lost various possessions, including the precious notebooks.

The few records still in my possession included some detailed maps I had made, with a system of numbering I had devised for every field, hedge, field corner and pond. I am surprised by the number of ponds; in 30 fields, there were 14 ponds, with 2 ponds in each of two of the fields. Sadly, return visits indicate that meadows have gone, some hedges have been replaced by fences and almost all of the ponds have been filled in. I knew this area not like the back of my hand but far better (I've always thought that a poor simile anyway as I don't normally give the back of my hand more than a glance). Also, I managed to find a book I had made of paintings of 118 bird species accompanied by information on local distribution, with its rather pompous, Victorian-style title Coloured Plates of Birds in Flintshire observed by J.H.Elphick (Volume 1).

A good few years ago, my brother Richard, who lives in Llanfairtalhaiarn not far from where I was brought up, was looking through some old papers when he came across a bulging package of letters, mostly from me to him, with some the other way round. Beginning in the early 1960s, they span the second half of my teenage years, with a few from my twenties. Although the later ones tend to contain much about girlfriends, music and other delights, the bulk of them are packed with news of wildlife, especially birds, and of the people who shared my passion. I was surprised to find that even as a teenager I was a stationery fetishist: an entire, long paragraph is taken up with extolling the virtues of a new biro I had bought for one shilling, with minutiae of ink colour, purchase of refills and so on. I sometimes wrote more than once in a week, with many letters consisting of 10 or more double-sided pages of Basildon Bond. The record was 44 sides !! Having in my hands this fat bundle of correspondence packed with information felt like losing gold but being given silver.

Another personal loss is that of keen hearing. Typically on a day out looking for birds, as many as two-thirds are first identified by sound. I can no longer hear high-pitched songs or calls unless the vocalist is nearby: this is how I first realised that I was losing my hearing – it was in London and I was carrying out my BTO census with Melanie my wife when she said "Have you got that bird to the left, and what's that one singing from over there?" I failed to hear either. I bought a CD of grasshopper song and after sticking it in the slot said to Melanie "This is a dud, when is it going to start?", to which she replied "They've been chirping for the last five minutes". Thankfully, and with the help of hearing aids, I can still hear many bird sounds – including my beloved waders – Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank, Greenshank and Golden Plover, although something of their subtle overtones has been lost. And unless I am near, I no longer pick up the song of the Mistle Thrush – the stormcock – which always sounds distant to me, rather like a Blackbird half remembered when waking from a dream.

Although, like many naturalists, I found the greatest rewards came when exploring alone, my father regularly accompanied me on walks and was always interested in what I saw. And my mother was particularly indulgent, allowing me to take her on quite challenging expeditions so I could show her birds. A letter records that after a record 14 mile trek, on which I managed to get us lost at one point, I summed up her performance with a rather condescending "well done" and noted that "she was exhausted" and that "It took her about a week to recover from it although I knew she could do it!" Another, critical, comment was "It is almost impossible to make Mum stop and observe birds; I almost lost her once, she forges ahead so rapidly, and so she doesn't see all I would have liked her to see."

My older brother Michael and his wife Jean showed a keen interest in my development as a naturalist and gave me great encouragement. When Michael took up post as a lecturer in computing science at Newcastle University he introduced me to zoology lecturers and to the curator of the renowned Hancock Museum, as well as buying me bird books.
Richard, more often at home, accompanied me on many expeditions as well as local walks, and became knowledgeable about birds in the field.

My three maiden aunts, Marjory, Doris and Winifred, who lived at Haslemere in Surrey, were also great encouragers. Their address always enchanted me: the Far Horizon, Half Moon Hill. I didn't visit them myself until I was in my twenties, and saw for myself their rapport with birds. One memorable occasion was in their beautiful garden when Marjory raised her head at an angle so that her profile resembled the figurehead on the prow of a galleon or one of Mervyn Peake's drawings, and a Great Tit flew down from a tree and perched on her chin to take the peanut she held between her front teeth.

Aunt Marjory in particular took a particular interest in nourishing my appetite for books and information, especially in relation to Gilbert White. White soon became a hero, and I pretended I was him as I walked around my parish investigating nature and making original discoveries. I tried to follow his example of putting aside the books and going out to see and think for myself. As he wrote in his *Natural History of Selborne*: 'It is, I find, in zoology as it is in botany, all nature is so full, that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined." I also had a local connection in that the better of White's two correspondents Thomas Pennant, the great 18th century naturalist, traveller and antiquarian, had his country seat, Downing Hall, just a few miles from Dyserth, next to the little village of Chwitfordd. All that remains of the hall after a fire in 1922 and subsequent demolition is a section of wall, but a recent visit reassured me that the grounds of the estate are still beautiful, though it was also memorable for witnessing one of the most savage fights I have ever seen between a couple of Robins.

A great influence on my development as a naturalist was my biology teacher at St Asaph Grammar School, Tony Angell. Both at school and out of it, he was a constant encouragement and a frequent companion too, as I was the only pupil who shared his love for direct observation of nature as opposed to its study indoors. Our adventures included trying to care for injured animals he or I brought in, including a Grey Heron, which saw us warily dodging that dagger of a beak: another potentially dangerous episode was handling a badger injured by a car. Sadly, it died, but we then decided to try and prepare a skin for the nature table. The moment when the world outside realised what we were up to was when the overpoweringly nauseous smell pervaded the whole wing of the school and Tony was asked to see the headmaster.

Another great inspirer was Peter Hope Jones, who became one of Wales' foremost naturalists and a national expert on seabirds. Although he had been at secondary school with my brothers it was a different school from mine, and the first time I met him was on a day trip with others to the National Nature Reserve at Newborough Warren, where he was warden. This is a place precious not only for its rich wildlife but also for the heartbreakingly beautiful views of the mountains of Snowdonia tailing off westward into Yr Eifl on the Llyn peninsula.
One of my letters describes Peter stepping out from a Land Rover to greet us, his binoculars patched with Christmas sellotape, and providing us with a memorable day, as he not only allowed us to watch one of the pairs of Montagu's Harriers that nested there between 1956 and 1964, but also showed us scarce insects and plants too, including many orchids, Grass of Parnassus and Round-leaved Wintergreen. Later I stayed with him at Serai, the warden's house in Newborough, and thought what a blissful life he had, as I helped him handle birds for ringing and peered down his microscope at bird-fleas he was studying.

A further major influence was not from a single person but an entire family of five – the Waltons. My first encounter was at Llyn Helyg, as I was emerging from the dense Alder woods fringing the lake, and they came out of the trees from the other side. I never looked back after

this and spent as much time as I could birdwatching with them locally and farther afield, learning from their collective expertise and poring over books in their extensive library.
On our visits to Newborough, we were sometimes accompanied by R. S. Thomas, who despite a certain forbidding countenance entertained with his dry wit and poet's eye for detail. Once we narrowed our eyes to hold empty limpet shells in front of them for a surrealist group photo.
I regarded as my second home the Waltons' house in Llanelwy, which they had named Cristin, after the observatory house on Ynys Enlli. At this time Peggy Walton was bookings secretary of the then Bardsey Birds and Field Observatory Committee. Bill Condry was its first honorary secretary, and he set out its major objective as "the study of natural history and particularly of bird migration". It was Peggy who was instrumental in enabling me to visit Bardsey by recommending that the Flintshire Ornithological Society should use surplus funds to pay for my stay on the island. She also provided regular advice and the chance to share concerns about the diverse range of wounded birds that I attempted to nurse back to health. Peggy had a large aviary in her garden in which she cared for a great range of patients including a pugnacious Common Scoter, and a Jackdaw, predictably named Jack, who enchanted me by flying onto my shoulder where he gently preened the hair on the back of my head, or sat tearing the petals from a flower he had plucked. Fred Walton was a dentist, and once Jack flew off with a set of false teeth and hid them, which took some explaining to a waiting patient. My letters confirm that Jack regularly visited our school. I wrote: "He comes into the classroms, plays havoc with kids' pen and pencil sets, throws things on the floor, pecks at one of the teacher's ear-rings, makes off with pens etc., and drinks ink from the inkwells!"

One of the most interesting of my rescued birds was a Knot, shot and injured in the flank on the Clwyd estuary near Rhyl. It was a sorry sight and easy to catch as it fluttered weakly along a muddy channel in the saltmarsh. A mark of how amazingly tolerant my mother was of my menagerie was that she allowed me to house this portly little wader in the living room cupboard of our modest house for several weeks. Furthermore, to replicate its habitat I removed pots and pans and other items and filled the cupboard with sand. I was despairing of getting my new arrival to feed until I realised that dropping the worms I had gathered in the garden onto the surface of the sand was no good – this was a bird that dug for its dinner. As soon as I buried the worms, it rushed around its miniature beach with its bill going up and down like a sewing machine needle and I was hard put to find enough to keep it satisfied. What a contrast, though, this sad individual in solitary confinement in a cupboard when it should have been surrounded by its kin in a protecting flock of thousands, performing their intricate aerial ballets like clouds of drifting smoke over the water.

Later, the same cupboard provided a snug hotel room for a Hedgehog rescued from a pile of branches and twigs destined for the November 5th bonfire.

Then there was Jo the Black-headed Gull, another shooting casualty. I kept detailed notes of his progress and my veterinary learning curve. For instance, a list in a seven-page report in one of my letters, headed "Official White Paper on *Larus ridibundus*" tells me that I fed him on a wide diet, which included herring, plaice, cod, sprats (his favourite fish), sardines, pilchards (tomato sauce washed out), dab, haddock, bread, brown and white, cheese, meat (dead shrew rejected after he tossed it around the aviary) and worms.

I found many oiled birds along the coast, especially sea ducks such as scoters and auks, mainly Guillemots. Richard and I managed to catch a badly afflicted Guillemot near Prestatyn and brought it home on the bus. As I entered the house my mother said "Where have you been, I'm putting the tea on the table now!" so I rushed upstairs and popped the bird in the bath. As I started on my food I heard a shriek from my mother who had gone to the toilet and suddenly seen it. "Will you get that eagle out of the bath immediately!" she admonished. I put on my serious ornithologist look and said "That's not an eagle, it's a Guillemot, *Uria aalge*."

There was also a Kestrel in the wash house, Blackbirds and other songbirds in boxes, and a Greylag Goose, like most of the patients a shooting casualty. Richard, who had a wonderfully gentle way with animals, including humans, volunteered to be the surgeon and removed the damaged part of the wing, staying up with the goose all night. This tough bird survived and after

a spell recuperating in Peggy Walton's large aviary, ended up at Chester Zoo, where it lived for many more years.

As well as being so encouraged by these individuals, I benefited hugely from joining two local organisations. The first was the Dyserth & District Field Club. Founded in 1911, it included in my day geologists, historians, archaeologists, botanists, a freshwater biologist and a zoologist. Regulars on the programme of local walks and occasional excursions farther afield were elderly stalwarts like Mr Herbert Spooner, formerly a botanist at Kew, immaculate in a white macintosh, two other expert botanists, the Misses Gilham and Gleave, and Mrs Higgins, a friend of my mother, who was an authority on local fungi. There was a preponderance of botanists, but I was the only Dyserth based ornithologist, so I was chosen to lead outings in search of birds from when I was 15 years old. It could be frustrating on a visit to a coastal marsh or a woodland when I found a new bird to show them at exactly the same time as the plant hunters were bending and crouching with heads down and bottoms up to enthuse over a scarce plant.

Soon after, my social life as a naturalist was enlarged further and focused on birds by my joining The Flintshire Ornithological Society, with its varied progamme of lectures and field trips to many parts of North Wales. As well as Peggy and Fred Walton, it included Sergeant Mervyn Jones, based at Rhyl Police Station, who was of great help in those days of less stringent bird protection and many cowboy hunters armed with airguns, rifles and shotguns. After Peggy, Richard and I challenged two illegal shooters who had killed Oystercatchers, a Redshank, a Grey Plover and a Turnstone at the Point of Ayr, Mervyn helped us bring about a successful prosecution. On another occasion after we convinced an uninterested desk officer at Rhyl police station to fetch him he sent a constable swiftly to confiscate an egg collection we had seen for sale in a pawnbrokers. As Peggy wrote later in one of her letters to me: "Every time we meet we always seem to end up in a police station!"

I held all my new friends in huge esteem – not out of deference to my olders and betters but because of their great trove of knowledge based on a lifetime of experience in the field as well as in the library and museum; their generosity in sharing it with me; and their youthful delight in what we discovered together. In those early days being a serious naturalist used to be seen as deeply eccentric by many people. So it was crucial that I had found people to legitimise my passion for all creatures great and small. For instance, when leading one of the Field Club walks, I spotted a colony of rats living in and around a discarded mattress. Far from muttering "Ugh! aren't they disgusting!" or recoiling in fear, the members shared my interest … little Miss Gilham, one of the botanists, rushed across the road, saying "Oh do let me see, I find rats so fascinating."

It was thanks to the Flintshire Ornithological Society that I paid an unforgettable visit to Ynys Enlli, Bardsey Island. Still vivid memories include being holed up in a B & B in Aberdaron waiting for stormy weather to lift so that the redoubtable boatman and island farmer Wil Evans could carry us safely across the maelstrom that is Bardsey Sound. The crossing saw us baleing out water from an old dinghy towed by a small, puttering motor boat containing cattle and nicknamed The Bentley, the two fragile craft alternately disappearing in the floor of the swell and riding high on the crest of each wave. We were accompanied by Guillemots and Razorbills and Shags which I could almost reach out and touch, with a cliff-nesting Buzzard wheeling round, a Peregrine streaking past, and gleaming white Gannets in the distance. After what seemed like hours our arrival in the little harbour saw me fall straight into the water when my freezing cold and wet legs refused to bend as I stood on the edge of the boat.

Scampering about free as a bird on my glorious own along the grassy clifftops of the east side, I craned my neck to see over the edge and marvel at the Choughs, blowing about in the updraught like sheets of charred paper and then diving down almost to hit the rocks and white foam far below, their sealing wax red bills and legs aflame in their glossy black plumage. Then there was the notorious lighthouse 'attraction' – the euphemistic name given it by ornithologists to the phenomenon whereby nocturnal migrants are dazzled by the powerful light and are often killed as they strike the tower. This saw us at dawn gazing in sadness at drifts of small corpses of warblers, thrushes and other migrants. Islands have always simultaneously given me the edgy

thrill of being marooned and at the same time a blissful sense of freedom, and Bardsey was paradise.

Back home, one of the most exciting discoveries I made in the fields was of what was by then a rare summer visitor – the Corncrake. Birds of dense cover, Corncrakes are usually hard to see, but their loud song is unmistakeable and carries for up to a mile. I tracked at least two males on many occasions in June 1961. There are mentions in the letters – but all my detailed notes and drawings were lost, alas. And then at last I saw one of the males. This involved hiding in a blackthorn hedge, my tender teenage flesh being ripped apart by its vicious thorns as I hunkered down to watch him partly emerge from the lush vegetation, craning his neck to broadcast the monotonous double rasp of his song.

The English common name Corncrake – and its Welsh equivalent Rhegen yr Yd – is in fact a misnomer, as this slender relative of the moorhen rarely breeds among cereal crops. Those beautiful damp hay meadows, a rare anachronism nowadays, are its quintessential home and they were still there, though already diminished, when I was walking the fields.
The splendid new *Atlas of Breeding Birds of North Wales* indicates that in Flintshire calling birds were heard up to 1968. There was then a hiatus, after which the last known isolated breeding in North Wales was in 1992 when a pair bred in Anglesey and another pair in Denbighshire.
It would need a concerted effort of reintroduction to re-establish this remarkable bird, and to ensure any hope of breeding, modern methods of haycutting would have to be forbidden. I might even have seen the last birds to breed – or at least attempt to do so – in my parish.
Here's Bill Condry writing about Welsh corncrakes in *Wildlife, My Life*, after returning from a trip to north-west Scotland in which he felt sure he would hear corncrakes but didn't. "A local farmer phoned to say that his mowing machine had destroyed a corncrake's nest. … Eight red-spotted buff eggs were scattered about, half of them smashed. So calamity had struck what was probably the very last nest in this neighbourhood of the poor, inoffensive corncrake, an elusive, brownish, ground-running bird no bigger than a starling but with a voice as loud as a crow's."

Let us not forget that this was a bird that as late as the 1930s kept people awake over much of the British Isles with its incessant two-note rasping song delivered by night as well as day, in some cases up to 20,000 times in a single night. As Mark Cocker notes in *Birds Britannica*: "Small wonder, perhaps, that in the late 1930s during the first major investigation into the causes of its decline, several correspondents asked how they could get rid of them!"

Another standout memory of my Dyserth days relates to the Corncrake's infinitely more common cousin, the Moorhen. I used to monitor their nests on the farm ponds regularly, and happened to visit one whose clutch of buff, brown-blotched eggs included one very near to hatching. As I bent down to admire them, the chick started cheeping from within. I cheeped back and fancied we were having some kind of conversation. It turns out that this was not so fanciful a notion after all, as my friend that great ornithologist – and last year's Condry lecturer – Tim Birkhead explains in his wonderful book on birds' eggs, *The Most Perfect Thing*. He points out that in birds like ducks – and my moorhens – the chicks are able to run around soon after hatching. Thus it is vital that they hatch at the same time so they can be shepherded by their mother and kept safe. But how is synchronisation achieved? Tim writes: "Margaret Vince, a researcher in Cambridge in the 1960s, solved the problem when she discovered that eggs talk to each other." He goes on to explain how Vince realised the sounds made by chicks inside Japanese quail eggs could be signals enabling them to synchronise their hatching. She found that the eggs had to be touching for synchronous hatching, indicating that the communication is partly tactile as well as auditory, and also that the sounds made by the chicks could either slow down or speed up the hatching process. So my Moorhen chick was not talking to <u>me</u> but to one of its brothers or sisters.

Looking through the letters, I am surprised to see how many nests I found. This is a skill that went out of fashion with the welcome ban on egg collecting resulting from the Protection of Birds Act in 1954. Today it is once more regarded as a vital part of ornithology, as it provides invaluable data to support conservation efforts. Keeping regular watch over particular nests also brought me rewards in the form of interesting observations of behaviour. For instance, I watched

one brood of Spotted Flycatchers learning to acquire the skills implicit in their name, and noted that they were clumsier than their parents, one even hitting the perch to which it returned. I was also reminded of how often I saw this species – yet another whose numbers have plummeted.

A loss of a different kind is perhaps an inevitable by-product of encouraging more people to take an interest in natural history. It is good that more and more people can enjoy nature reserves – and hopefully come away with experiences they cannot get from watching nature programmes on TV – but for me their hides and waymarked footpaths and interpretation boards create a distance between the observer and the observed. It was so much better when we found tracks and hiding places of our own and learned at first hand what bird sang that song or where and when we might be most likely to encounter it.

The great thing about being a neophyte naturalist is that there are so many firsts to thrill and inspire. One of many that stands out in my memory was my first Little Owl. I was scanning the branches of a large old Oak tree for birds when suddenly, there appeared in the bright circle of my binocular view a wonderful sight, a bird only the size of an overweight thrush but clearly an owl. Compared to the Tawnies and Barn Owls, whose hoots and shrieks respectively were my main point of contact, this was an owl you could really get to know as although mainly abroad after dark it was active by daylight too. I was entranced as I watched it, and struck not only by its well attested clownishness, head bobbing and white eyebrows frowning, but by its boldness. Not only did it remain in the tree for a good while but it moved closer and glared at me even more intently with its yellow ringed eyes as if to say 'Clear off, this is my land your trespassing on!". Then it suddenly left in bounding flight and disappeared into another tree but soon it returned to the same branch. This was the first of many encounters, and once I'd got my ear in and learned it, I often used to hear their calls and the melancholy rising whistle of the males as they advertised their presence at dusk.

Other memorable meetings with this introduction from Europe were watching one walking across a ploughed field picking off beetles and another almost falling backwards with the effort of yanking worms from their burrows in grassland. Sadly, this is another loss from my area, with few left there now.

I was born in a nursing home called Chatsworth House that no longer exists on a hillside in Prestatyn. Known locally as 'Fish Mountain' because of the fossil fish that were found there, this is the northernmost hill in the Clwydian range, near the beginning of the Offa's Dyke long distance path. It was in this place that 37 years after I entered the world I might well have abruptly left it, less than a mile from where I was born. I was walking along a path flanking the hill when I was surprised to see a couple of Fulmars gliding round a limestone cliff with steep surrounding slopes. Hoping to discover an unusual inland nesting site, I scrambled up the increasingly steep incline. Soon, I was nearly level with the suspected breeding ledge when I grabbed the branch of a handy stunted Broom shrub for balance only to have it come away in my hand from the crumbly earth. Anxious to protect my expensive binoculars I held them tight with both hands against my chest rather than trying to use my arms as brakes. I was on my back hurtling down the steep rocky slope and heading for a potentially fatal drop over the edge into a boulder-strewn quarry. Fortunately I landed against a large gorse bush, and as I disengaged myself I could hear the Fulmars high overhead cackling as if in mockery.

I found out later from others that the birds had indeed started nesting at this site, and then recorded much later that they had colonised one a good deal farther inland, at the recently abandoned limestone quarry in Dyserth, about four miles from the sea.

Another much earlier brush with mortality was when I was about eight years old. I was climbing a sheer rock face at one of the small abandoned quarries on Moel Hiraddug, the big whalebacked hill that dominated the village, watched by my gang of friends, when I reached for a familiar hand-hold next to a large curtain of ivy near the top. Suddenly, a Tawny Owl that had been roosting in the ivy shot out and as it passed me, brushed my face with a wing. I fell about 20 feet, fortunately into a large bush rather than to have my head split open on the big boulders below, accompanied of course by the nervous laughter of my friends. When I last visited this place a year ago, I found that the quarry had become virtually invisible, swallowed up by an impenetrable tangle of ash and scrub.

On the subject of birds of prey, Bill Condry wrote in his superb memoir of his life as a naturalist, *Wildlife, My Life*: "Gamekeepers! How we loathed the keepers of those days when, creeping quietly through the coverts, we came upon the rotting bodies of the so-called vermin which gamekeepers nailed in rows along the rails to prove to their employers that the pheasants were being efficiently protected from predators. These gibbets usually included stoats, weasels, crows, jays and magpies along with, and this really sickened us, our beloved little owls, tawny owls, sparrowhawks and kestrels." On my visits to a particular wood near Dyserth where pheasants were reared I was appalled at the sight of exactly the same list of victims listed by Bill, with the shocking addition once of a Barn Owl.

Peregrines were rare treats at Point of Ayr and farther west, in Snowdonia and along the coast, for this was the time of the pesticide devastation that saw the species decline almost to extinction. Encounters with Peregrines are always thrilling. Even when they are sitting still doing nothing – as nesting birds often are – they are an arresting sight, with the latent power in that sturdy body and the intensity of the gaze. But it's the galvanic hunting dive or 'stoop' that sets the blood racing most. One of the most memorable of all the stoops I have witnessed was when I was watching a juvenile Redshank on the sand at Aber near Bangor through my telescope when suddenly into the circle of light there was a flurry of feathers as a Peregrine hit the struggling wader and carried it off.

Whereas Peregrines are now far more numerous than they were, Kestrels are suffering a sharp decline. In my childhood, they were the commonest raptor. Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote that there is nowhere more beautiful than the Vale of Clwyd, spent three years at St Beuno's Jesuit College, just a few miles up the road from my house. Walking where he walked, I like to think that the Kestrels I see may be descendants of the ones that inspired him to write his famous poem 'The Windhover'.

Music as well as poetry has so many intimate connections with nature for me. As I wrote in Mark Cocker's *Birds Britannica*: " Hearing Vaughan Williams' sublime music in 'The Lark Ascending' always transports me back to my Welsh childhood, lying flat on my back in the gloriously unimproved rough grassland of the Vale of Clwyd, and watching the singing Skylark as he soared higher until I wasn't sure whether I could see him or not. Like the real song itself, it evokes a bygone pastoral golden age and the open countryside which the bird once seemed to symbolise – a vital part of sunny spring and summer days, with huge clouds rolling across blue skies, and the days, like the inviting patchwork of fields, stretching out before me."

A bird divorced from its landscape is a lesser experience: one has only to gaze at a bird in a zoo or aviary to realise the truth of this. So for me, stubble fields will always mean little huddles of Grey Partridges and their wonderful rusty gate sounds at dusk; dark ploughed fields with spring shoots peeping through, Lapwings running and bowing and hurtling about in the sky with wild cries on those big thrumming wings; and cool, deep oakwoods, glowing male Redstarts.

For many naturalists, that relative of the Robin, the Redstart, is an iconic bird, and with good reason. It occurs in greatest numbers in Wales, and was a bird particularly beloved of Bill and Penny Condry. The first view of a male in his ash grey, blood orange and soot black plumage generates an intense sensation that commits itself powerfully to memory. My first – or at least the first I was aware of – was in Henfryn Hall wood, near the old Marian Mills.
I may have unknowingly seen Redstarts as a binocular-less infant there, but will always recall my first enraptured view through the transformative lenses at about the age of nine as a novice birdwatcher. The whole area was imbued with a potent air of mystery, and from my earliest visits there before my fifth birthday, I was awed by the scary sight of the Witch's Cave, as our family called it – an old millrace with the water pouring down in front of a dense hanging curtain of waterweed. If I lingered to look, I quickly became convinced that the witch would suddenly emerge to snatch me and take me into her lair, so I scuttled off to catch up with my parents and brothers.

Later, with a gang of friends, I would insinuate myself behind the smooth sheet of water. Here

we would hide, pulses racing, grubby bodies pressed together, from other roaming bands of boys. The stream continued into the Redstart wood itself, where it was partly hidden for much of the year by dense ground cover of Wild Garlic and Dog's Mercury, and many fallen decayed branches and trunks. These added to the dark and seemingly unmanaged wood's mystique. In this Rackhamesque domain, with its gnarled trunks staring us out, like innocent children in a fairy tale we played among the gaping, roofless ruins of a long-deserted cottage, almost hidden among the ivy, sheltering from rain – or rival gangs – beneath the huge parasols of giant *Gunnera* plants.

A more recent Redstart encounter that etched itself on my memory occurred during a second visit in April 2008 with my wife Melanie and friends Ian and Gail to a wonderful refuge from the stresses and irritations of modern life – the old Lake District shooting lodge known as The Bungalow. It stands at the entrance to the little visited Martindale, south-west of Penrith, on the Dalemain estate of the Hasell family. A large green-walled, red-roofed structure, it was built for Hugh Lowther, the 5th Earl of Lonsdale (of the boxing belt fame, and also founder of the Automobile Association), for a visit by Kaiser Wilhelm to the Martindale Red Deer shoot. Mel and I slept in Kaiser Bill's bedroom and used the huge curly-legged bath in which he would have lowered his imperial bulk. We drew a shallow and unsatisfying depth of rusty water, almost the colour of the cock Redstart's breast, before leaping into a freezing bed. The place, which lacks electric power and is lit at night only by gas lamps, has stunning views from every window, which are less dramatic but more panoramic when gazed on from the verandah running right round the building.

After a day out and a meal in a local pub, we returned well after dark in wild weather to climb the extremely steep track from the parking area at the foot of the hillock from which The Bungalow commands its amazing view. As the wind gusted with storm force and heavy rain lashed against the weatherboard walls, Ian, who was approaching the front door, shouted down to me: "There's a bird here, fluttering about under the eaves; it's got a red breast". "Robin" I yelled back. "This is no Robin" was the rejoinder as Ian drew nearer, "it's got a black and white pattern on its head." The Redstart was bedraggled but instantly recognisable as I joined him, and we debated what we should do about this little forlorn traveller. There was talk of a warm box indoors, but I pointed out that it was unlikely we could catch it, and the attempt would be bound to stress the waif further, following our shouting, torch-flashing approach – or drive it away to a more exposed roost. I awoke early the next morning, but it had gone. I hoped it made it to a vacant territory and a mate. I toyed with the notion that it may possibly have paused in the Dyserth wood on its long journey north from its African wintering grounds. Whatever, it is increasingly to those early Welsh birds that my heart returns. Not just in the oak woods but also in hedges with mature trees I would often glimpse a glowing red tail restlessly shivering like a little flame in the shadows.

However, my delight at watching birds was not all gained in beautiful country. Encounters with wildlife can thankfully take one’s mind off what can otherwise be deeply unidyllic landscapes, like rubbish tips enlivened by clouds of gulls and corvids, or the shoreline of the Point of Ayr, sticking out like a dirty thumb into the Dee Estuary, a local birdwatching hotspot for me. When I was a regular visitor in the 1950 and early ‘60s, this was a place that was dotted with old caravans and prefabs, rusty tin cans and broken glass, gangs of youths with airguns, and occasionally older men with shotguns and out-of-work scavengers for coal on the black shores around the colliery. Baking hot in summer and freezing my nuts off in winter, it was here that as a youngster where half a field guide full of waders, wildfowl, raptors, buntings and other birds brought the thrill of first recognition and appreciation.

The River Clwyd between Rhuddlan and Rhyl was another favourite haunt of mine that yielded a wealth of waders and other birds, especially in winter and the spring and autumn migration periods. Alas it was also a draw for the same army of shooters who paid scant regard to legislation aimed at bird protection. A mark of this vandalism is that I referred to the place in one of my letters to Richard as ‘the river of death’. But when the despoilers were not there, it was a peaceful place where I rarely met others. And it was here that I saw my first Short-eared Owls and Curlew Sandpipers, Greenshanks and Spotted Redshanks.

The Corn Bunting – that plainest of small streaky brown birds which looks like a drabber, pumped-up female sparrow and has the simplest of songs recalling the jangling of a bunch of keys – has for 80 years been scarce in Wales, hanging on only in the north-east, where I recorded it as very localised but often common in areas where it was present. Today, following a precipitous decline nationally of the order of 90 percent, although it lingers on across the border in Cheshire, it has gone completely from the region, indeed from almost all of Wales. A trio of birds that I met virtually every time I went out to my local patch deserves special mention, for they are all now absent. Until the late 1960s the Curlew was a widespread breeder over most of the county of Flintshire. Since its shocking 80% decline in Wales, it has vanished from my area. The news from across the water in Ireland is even grimmer. The Welsh name *gylfinir* translates simply as 'long-bill'. The scientific name is *Numenius arquata*, which means 'the bow-like bird of the new moon', providing two metaphors for the shape of the long decurved bill.

The second loss is that of the Lapwing – once my part of North Wales held the most breeding Lapwings: now although still hanging on in places near the Clwyd Estuary, it has vanished utterly from the fields where I used to watch the males' glorious tumbling spring displays and find their nests.

The same but even more so applies to the Grey Partridge, which from being a common everyday bird of my childhood now not only has disappeared from my area but is almost extinct in North Wales as a whole.

The State of Nature report just published a couple of weeks ago makes grim reading: since 2012, 56% of all UK species surveyed, from Hedgehogs to butterflies, are in decline, and 15% of them – more than one in seven – are critically endangered and likely to become extinct unless something is done to save them. The Puffin and Turtle Dove are facing extinction not just here, but globally. How have we as a nation allowed this to happen?

Here's an apposite quote from that great conservationist Nigel Collar:
"Birds are still going extinct, their populations are declining, wilderness is in retreat, and human hegemony of the planet is virtually complete. The most depressing aspect of all this is how few people seem to care. Perhaps it is the fate of all conservationists to fall in love with the Earth, and to die brokenhearted."

Yes, the outlook for wildlife is all too often getting worse. But it's also sometimes getting better and we must focus on this as well as the losses. I have already alluded to some of the positive stories. Others include the dramatic turnaround of the Red Kite's fortunes since the late 1940s and early 50s, when only a handful survived in mid-Wales, prompting Bill Condry and others to form the Kite Committee to save these beautiful birds. Ospreys now breed in North Wales, as they never did when I was a youngster. Little Terns along the coast at Gronant now receive round the clock protection from tourists and their dogs, and the colony that I recall just hanging on has increased greatly as a result. And then there is the phenomenon that is Citizen Science: an amazing 7 and a half million man and women hours are clocked up annually by an army of volunteers who enthusiastically give up their time to monitor the fortunes of wildlife.

With a government at best indifferent and mostly inimical to wildlife and the environment, unless it can be shot or made money out of, it is incumbent on us all to take a stand. We must make our individual and collective voices heard if we are to secure the survival of the irreplaceable treasure that is our wildlife. As well as the moral imperative, it is well established that being in touch with nature is essential for our well being, for we are part of it, or should be.

I have another, more personal reason for needing constant contact with nature. Since my beloved wife Melanie died six months ago, I have learned that keeping busy helps, but it can also bring stress at what is such a wearying time. The only time I find real solace is when I am out there with the birds and all those other endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful. Totally absorbed, totally immersed.

Exactly a week ago today I was at Cambridge, helping to run the eighth annual conference of that unique organisation New Networks for Nature, on whose steering group I have had the pleasure of serving since it started. This year was by far our biggest gathering, in association with Cambridge University's recently established Conservation Initiative in the superb new David Attenborough Building. A high point was the concluding session, entitled 'Hope', in which the last speaker was the great man himself. Sir David gave an inspiring speech straight from the heart and entirely without notes, and in conclusion raised his arms and thanked every one present for helping to create hope for the future of wildlife. Not a dry eye in the house, and as we as one stood and clapped and cheered and stamped our feet I could see that he was similarly moved. It was a hugely encouraging demonstration of collective strength, and an innovation was that we asked every one in the audience to turn to the person next to them and share how they thought we could best help fight the forces of darkness and achieve a better outcome for nature.

I'd like to carry this message here and ask you to pass it on. And not just to the converted – important for a sense of solidarity, yes, but we must go out into our communities and argue for a far more prominent priority for nature. And in convincing people that it matters it is vital to not only issue warnings and speak of catastrophic declines but also to tell stories of success, of hope and of love. It is the only way – of that I am convinced. That is how my own interest was fostered and encouraged to grow. All my mentors loved the birds and other wildlife they studied and strived to protect. And this love for nature shines through on every page that Bill Condry wrote.

I'd like to thank Jim Perrin and the rest of the Condry Memorial Lecture team for helping to make this such a memorable occasion for me and I hope for all of you, and of course one in which to remember Bill Condry. I wish you all rapture and revelation wherever you walk in this glorious countryside and thank you all for coming to hear me.