

Bill



Oddie



UNPLUCKED



Columns, blogs and musings

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B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Natural History
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2015

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for.

ISBN (HB): 978-1-4729-1531-3

ISBN (ePub): 978-1-4729-1532-0

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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Foreword

Nearly every day people smile at me in the street. A delightfully high percentage say something like 'Hi Bill' or 'How are you doing, Bill?' or even 'Thanks for all the pleasure you have given me over the years.' It doesn't come much more flattering than that. I love it. However, there are a few people – just a few – whose approach is not quite so sensitive. They tend to stare at me for a bit and then ask: 'Didn't you used to be Bill Oddie?' I usually mutter: 'I still am'. But such folk are immune to irony. They continue: 'I thought you were. You used to be on the telly!' As if I might have forgotten. I thank them for reminding me. 'Yeah, with those two other blokes, you used to ride a bike.' The memories come flooding back. 'Yeah, you, Tim Brooke something and... the other one.' As it happens Graeme Garden is used to being called 'the other one' and he wouldn't be bothered. But I am. By remembering me only for my part in *The Goodies* 40 years ago, this bloke has dismissed – or maybe just missed – the product of half my working career! I could ask him what he thought of my wildlife programmes,

but I can anticipate the answer: 'My mum likes those.' He doesn't need to add: 'Can't stand 'em myself,' though he may imply that by asking me to autograph a bus ticket while informing me: 'It's not for me.' I sign: 'Goody wishes to mum,' which hopefully will keep them both happy.

Truthfully and fortunately, the public enquiry I get most often these days is: 'When are we going to see you on telly again?' When indeed?! My only possible – and truthful – response is: 'It's not up to me. Write to the BBC. Please!' They may well already have done, but nothing's happened yet. But – just for the record – I am still Bill Oddie.

So, the next question has to be: what have I been doing for the last three or four years? Well, one of them was largely spent in and out of bed and psychiatric hospital, suffering from what was eventually diagnosed as bipolar disorder. Looking back now, I can reassess periods and incidents throughout my life when my behaviour fitted the basic pattern of manic depression swinging between being miserable and grumpy, or hyperactive and extrovert. The deep depressions are easy to label as a mental illness, but the manic and belligerent episodes get labelled simply as 'character'. Sometimes productive and creative, and sometimes a pain in the arse. Yep, that's me. Or at least, that's what I used to be. These days, people who should know – like my family – say that I am a much more amiable person. I am also out of work.

I won't go into all the details of my departure from *Springwatch* and *Autumnwatch*, partly because I have never been fully able to work them out. Suffice it to say that I believe that a manic phase of the bipolar was the reason that I was eventually told: 'We won't be asking you to do the next series.' It almost sounds like a judge teasing a contestant on *The X Factor*. 'We won't be asking you... We'll be telling you!' At which point I hug the BBC Head of Natural History! (That'll be the day.) No such luck. The words I was hearing were a euphemism for 'You're fired!' I almost wish that was what they'd said. I imagine it is much easier to be indignant and defiant when you are curtly told: 'You're fired.' If they'd said that I would probably have stomped out. Instead, I cried.

Frankly, I never did get a detailed explanation, but I have to acknowledge that during my final *Autumnwatch* on Brownsea

Island and even more so during location filming for a series called *Inspired by Nature*, I was ultra-critical, domineering, over-confident, impatient, etc. These are all things I have been on and off all my life, but in a state of bipolar-type mania, everything is heightened and more overpowering for those you work and live with. I am not saying that the BBC fired me because they realised that I was bipolar. They didn't know. And neither did I until the last month of the following year during which I was twice hospitalised for my own safety (a euphemism I'll leave you to decipher) and had to meet the crippling costs of private care, which didn't make me feel any cheerier! Ironically, it was when I was admitted to an NHS Crisis Centre that a doctor announced: 'I am putting you on lithium.' Only a week or two later, I heard one of my daughters ringing round with the glad tidings: 'He's back!'. Just in time for Christmas! By the new year I felt fine and I have been that way ever since. I can't claim that lithium is a guaranteed cure for bipolar but it works for some people. It has worked for me.

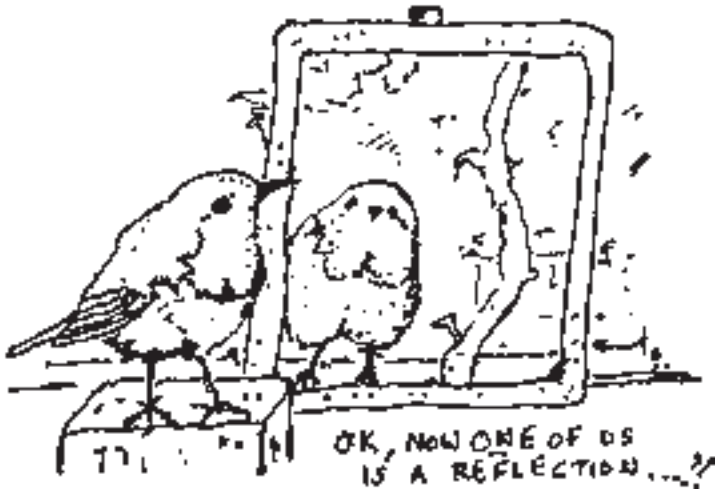
Right then, that's got that stuff out of the way. But the question remains: if I haven't been on the telly for a couple of years, what have I been doing? Once I was optimistic enough to accept that my recovery would be permanent, I made a decision to spend much more of my time supporting the organisations I admire and knew were contributing so much in the areas of nature conservation and animal welfare. I am happy to say that most of them (maybe all) were welcoming and appreciative. Over the past two years, you may have been aware of my sporadic appearances on the media on behalf of the Wildlife Trusts, the RSPB, RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming, The Humane Society, the League Against Cruel Sports, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the World Land Trust, Global Witness and others. I have tangled with ministers, appeared on *Newsnight* (though not with Paxman) and have accumulated a fine collection of security passes to the Commons and the Lords, though I have yet to appear on *Today in Parliament!* In tune with the zeitgeist I have become an ambassador (never without my Ferrero Rocher) for several NGOs (non-governmental organisations). In this capacity, I have visited Brazil, Argentina, South Carolina, Iceland, Guatemala, Zambia and Borneo.

During this time I have seen quite a lot of wildlife – much of it endangered. Whales, orangutans, elephants, and a fair number of new birds for my world list. However, wonderful though these creatures be, undoubtedly the most satisfying, enlightening, inspiring and enjoyable aspect has been meeting some terrific human beings. I don't mean to be ungracious about lots of lovely people I have worked with in the past, but – put it this way – people involved in the world of NGOs tend to be, well, nicer than those in broadcasting, and a *lot* nicer than those in politics. Here's a catchphrase for life: 'Doing good, does you good.'

The other thing I have been doing a lot more of is writing: articles, essays, blogs, tweets and so on. In this book I have hopefully collected some of the most interesting, contentious, amusing, etc. For me, there are two major attractions about writing or compiling a book. One is that I am allowed to get on with it, at least till the editor reads the final version and insists on lots of changes and rewrites (note to ed: please don't). The other attraction is freedom from a word count. Most magazine articles have to fit one page and so musn't be much more than 600 words or, for two pages, 1,200 words, and so on. Whatever the word count, it is never enough. Non-writers may assume the shorter the easier, but if you have any enthusiasm or imagination you need space to indulge it. I can honestly say that every single article I have ever written has been too long and I or the editor have had to cut it down. Sometimes I weep as a gem of a sentence or a joke has to go. This book is my chance to reinstate some of them. Many of these pieces are first drafts, uncut, the length that nature – and I – intended. So even if you think: 'I am sure I read this one in *BBC Wildlife*,' keep going, 'cos I might have had to cut the best bit, and now I have the opportunity to put it back. I might even have added a bit more.



CLOSE TO HOME



CHAPTER ONE

How to Be a Ludicrous Gardener

‘It’s getting ludicrous,’ my wife told me. She was referring to my garden. She meant it as a criticism. I took it as a compliment. I am not sure that ‘ludicrous’ is the appropriate word, but I admit my garden is not conventional. It is not meant to be.

It isn’t big – about half a tennis court. I have divided it into clearly demarcated areas, some of them inspired by my international travels. For example, there is the ‘magic tree’ – actually a lilac – festooned with the kind of shiny, glittery, swivelling things you can buy at a ‘New Age’ shop, augmented with strips of coloured paper and a few fake insects. Roadside trees in India are often decorated thus. Then there are the ‘Inca Ruins’, created from a few crusty old house bricks, some fragments of clay pottery, and one of those plaques with a smiley

sun's face on it, which looks Inca-ish, even though it is actually from Camden Town Garden Centre. There is also a thriving thicket of tropical jungle, with ferns, palm trees, bits of bamboo and a couple of Buddhas. This I originally called 'Vietnam', even though I had never been there. I have recently renamed it 'Borneo'.

I have also excavated five small ponds, divided by equally small rockeries, which look almost natural. The same can't be said of 'Gnome Corner', the home of an ever-increasing colony of nearly 100 gnomes, some pleasingly jolly, others morose, but most of them undeniably tasteless. The whole effect is – what is the word? Imaginative? Quirky? Unconventional? Oh, OK. Ludicrous!

But what about the wildlife? To be honest, at first glance, one could be forgiven for assuming that my garden has been specially designed to deter birds. For a start, it is not exactly quiet. When a breeze blows, windmills whirr and wind chimes of all sizes tinkle and clang, like an under-rehearsed Balinese gamelan orchestra. Then there are the plastic predators. Lots of them. Many gardens have one. Usually a plastic heron, posing by the pond to deter real herons from gobbling up the goldfish. Have you noticed that it doesn't work? For a very good reason. If a flying heron looks down and sees what appears to be another heron crouched immobile over the water, it assumes that there are fish to be caught, and is most likely to join its chum, real or plastic. Wildfowlers use the same technique to lure ducks. They put out decoys. The fact is that fake birds are, if anything, likely to attract others of the same species, not scare them away. I have three herons and two egrets in my garden. Admittedly, I have only ever had one real heron, but then I haven't got any fish.

I also have several of those model hawks and owls that are meant to frighten birds away from airfields and valuable crops. So, do they clear my garden too? I conducted an experiment. I put a very realistic plastic Peregrine Falcon on my shed roof. This is a bird feared by many others, especially pigeons, which make up the staple Peregrine diet. I returned to the back room and lurked by the open door with my camcorder. Within 10 minutes I had

video of three Woodpigeons pottering round the Peregrine as if it were one of their own. It was almost as if they knew perfectly well it was a fake.

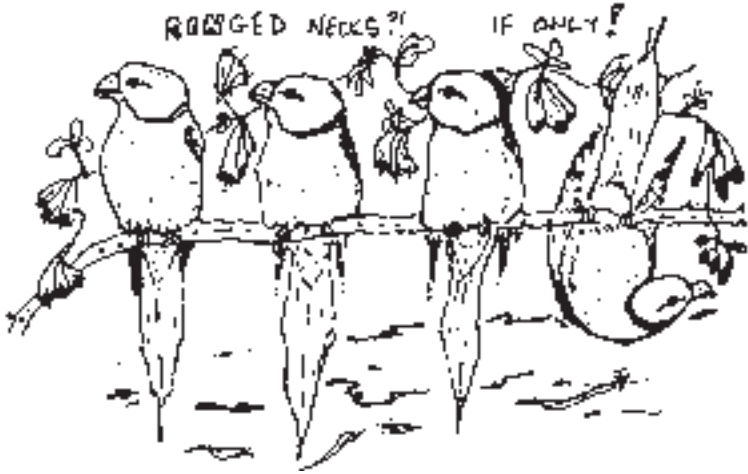
To confirm my conviction that birds are not daft, my garden is now guarded by the Peregrine, a Kestrel, an Eagle Owl, a Tawny Owl and no fewer than five Little Owls. I have pictures of them with Great Tits, Blue Tits and Robins perched on their heads! I even once – in the cause of science – put out a totally realistic model cat (not a stuffed real one). Barely a minute later, that too had a couple of Wrens hopping on its back, and a young rat gnawing at its tail!

Then there are my mirrors. The generally touted advice is that you should not put a mirror in a garden, because small birds will attack their own reflection, thinking it is a rival, and they could hurt themselves by pecking at the glass. I have indeed witnessed that kind of behaviour, but only by Dunnocks, and though there was a fair amount of fluttering, pecking and poking, I am pretty sure there was no beak-breaking or head-bruising. I even solicited a second opinion by placing a vanity mirror on the bird table. It got no reaction at all, although I reckon one particularly vain Robin did have a bit of a primp. Anyway, my noisy, garish, model-infested, ludicrous garden has five large mirrors and a number of little ones or even shards of mirror glass, suspended on fences, nestling in rockeries and wedged in bushes. Thus the many psychedelic features are reflected and multiplied, as if in a giant kaleidoscope. There is even a large mirrorball, which on sunny days sends showers of sunbeams dancing over the lawn, and even on the ceiling of the back room.

Despite all of this, I have 58 species on my garden list. Admittedly, this is over 20 years, and a fair proportion of them were flying or circling overhead, including eight birds of prey: Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Hobby, Red Kite, Buzzard, Honey Buzzard, Osprey and (real) Peregrine. Most birdwatchers count 'flyovers' on their garden lists – 'species seen in, over or from your garden' – except the RSPB. The rules for the annual Big Garden Birdwatch clearly state: 'Please record the highest number of bird species seen in your garden (not flying over).' Sounds a bit

mean, doesn't it ? Well, no, it is all in the interest of facts, figures and fun. Anyway, it doesn't mean you can't look at anything in the air. Including the sunbeams. But one word of caution. If you do have mirrors in your garden, make sure you don't count every bird twice.





CHAPTER TWO

Not in my Backyard

My neighbours are not insensitive to nature. They think wildlife is fine. In its place. Its place, however, is 'somewhere else'. Not in, on or over their home.

We were recently gossiping in true neighbourly fashion, when we were distracted by a flypast of the 'Green Arrows', a small squadron of Ring-necked Parakeets. I smiled. My neighbour winced.

'You must agree, Bill, that really is a horrible noise?' I did not agree. 'They're going to cull them though,' enthused the lady of the house. I disillusioned her: 'No. They're culling Monk Parakeets. Ring-neckeds are definitely here to stay.' 'But that dreadful noise! It's like, it's like...'. She searched for an aptly offensive synonym. 'It's like a dentist's drill!' I was truly taken aback. Not by the vehemence of her outrage, but by the inappropriateness of the comparison. A dentist's drill? The call of the parakeet could perhaps be likened to the demonic screeching of a banshee, or maybe a

Jay with a loudhailer, but surely not a dentist's drill! I left them exaggeratedly covering their ears, so they didn't hear my parting mutter: 'Think yourself lucky you don't live in Australia.'

So my neighbours don't like nasty noises. Well, neither do I. Especially the most intrusive, ear-offending, teeth-tingling and unnecessary noise of modern times: the relentless roar of a leaf blower! And – here's an irony – from whose garden does this noise pollution emanate? My neighbour's!

It seems to me that there are people who don't mind watching a bit of nature, but are not so keen on living with it. The bloke on the other side loathes Woodpigeons. He once caused several panic calls to 999 by firing fusillades of gunshots from his garden terrace. When I enquired what the **** he was doing, he replied: 'It's the pigeons. They keep messing on the garden furniture. It's OK, they're blanks.' I know that Woodpigeons produce purple poo that quick-dries to the consistency of reinforced concrete, which can not only desecrate garden furniture, but also obliterate a windscreen, nevertheless, that is no excuse for sitting in your town-house garden blasting away with a shotgun, blanks or no blanks. As the police told him.

Of course, it is all a matter of attitude. Just as one man's weeds are another man's wildflowers, one man's pests are another man's 'pets'. Next door's wasps are likely to feel the fatal thwack of *The Sunday Telegraph*. Mine get coaxed into a wine glass with a postcard and are thrown to freedom. I found the velvet-furred family of baby rats that played hide and seek among my garden gnomes two years ago as cute as any mice. Next door started muttering about 'getting a man in'. I suspect he did. I haven't seen a rat since.

I am sure somebody did get a man in last year, when three fox cub corpses were found in various gardens, but I am certain that this slaughter was not perpetrated by the folks next door. They have become rather fond of our local fox, even though – or perhaps because – he is a bit of a scamp. One recent morning, I heard an incensed curse from over the garden fence: 'That bloody fox!'

'What's it done now?' I enquired with appropriate neighbourly concern.

'The damn thing's stolen my slippers!'

‘He came in the house?’

‘No. Yesterday evening, I left my slippers out on the patio, and he’s had ’em!’

I had to chuckle. So did his wife. Eventually, so did he. ‘Ah well,’ he sighed philosophically, ‘I’ll just have to take it out on the leaf blower.’

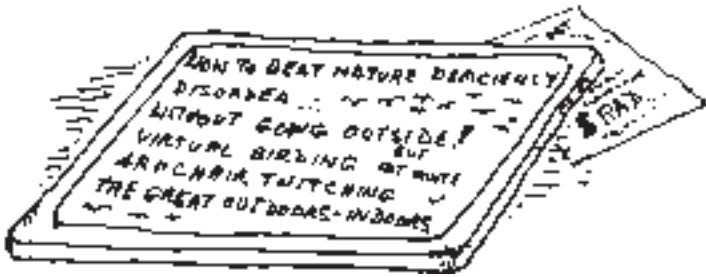
‘You do, and I’m going to get next door’s shot gun!’

My threat was obliterated by the cacophony of the infernal machine. It also covered the startled squawking of half a dozen panicking parakeets that had been dangling on my peanuts.

As they swooped over my neighbour, he looked up, and I swear I read his lips: ‘Mm. They are rather pretty. But what a horrible row!’

I should say so. He sounded worse than a dentist’s drill.





CHAPTER THREE

Young People Today

Earlier this year the National Trust published a booklet called *Natural Childhood*, motivated by the assumption that most children these days don't have one! Indeed, the syndrome is so dire that it has been designated an adolescent illness: Nature Deficit Disorder, which – translated from the American – means 'not enough nature'.

The national newspapers were intrigued, especially by a list entitled: '50 things to do before you are 11¾', which could, I suspect, be retitled '50 things National Trust members used to do when they were kids'. No offence, but I can't imagine that many primary schoolchildren are National Trust members, or that they'd appreciate oblique Adrian Mole references. The list is clearly a nostalgia-fest, compiled by 'oldies', which could have been headed: 'What we used to do when we played out.' A phrase now long obsolete.