

## In Search of the Sea-pie

A creek at low tide. The mud is warm, sliding between my toes like silk. Occasionally a razor shell bites at my sole as I paddle down to the shore. I am ten. The Norfolk coast is my playground but this short cut, this sunken way through the marsh, is of my father's choosing. We reach the spit, a low shingle ridge, curled round by the tide, covered in the shells of mussels and whelks. Dropping down, we squirm into the dunes, pushing through marram grass. Salt stings the tongue and there is a smell of seaweed and hot sand. We are creeping up on the Oystercatcher. From our dune scrape we can see the nest, a scratch in the sand, decorated with strings of seaweed. The eggs were laid in May, cryptically marked with sand coloured blotches. Two plushy, pebble-dashed fur balls on black legs have emerged. The adults are vigilant; their feverish piping pierces the shell crunch steps of intruders.

This is my bird. I adopted it for an RSPB *Bird and Tree* competition which encouraged children to study through observation of the natural world. It is probably no surprise that a child would choose a bird full of drama. With its ruby eye, orange bill and salt washed pink legs, the oystercatcher does not skulk along the shore but displays in piebald noisy groups. Their calls echo in the night, heckling our sleep, *kleep, kleep, kleep*. We call them Sea-pies and they seem always to be part of our lives on the coast. They don't eat oysters, unlike the all black American oystercatcher, whose name eventually arrived in Britain. By the 1840s local names such as Sea-pie, Meer-pie and Mussel Pecker were superseded.

Today we are collecting evidence – evidence of bills and feet. Our birds have left their mark in the sand. We wait while the young are shepherded to safety; then set off for the shore. Oystercatchers seek out mussel beds, hunting for 'Stewkey Blues,' but on this mud-rich coast they will also hunt for lugworms. We take an odd collection with us – not a bucket and spade for elaborate castles, but a thermos of water, a bag of plaster of Paris, a bowl and a stick. It is not difficult to find the long probed holes where the oystercatcher has been searching for food. We pour in the oozy plaster mix and wait. The retreating tide leaves a sparkle of ripples and worm casts. Sanderlings pick their way along the surf. The young oystercatchers have disappeared, cowered down in the lee of a tuft of sea purslane, mottled into the beach.

Now, with great care, we pull out of the sand a perfect cast of the oystercatcher's bill. Amazement –that our technique worked, and what a long bill it reveals. I didn't know then,

but oystercatchers living on mussels and cockles have blade-like bills to force open the shells. Those feeding mostly on worms have pointed bills. Oystercatchers follow the tide, finding their prey by touch, day and night. We cross the mudflats, following them, and find perfect footprints; the next plaster cast. Down on the tideline, oystercatchers are squabbling, bills down, parrying for position. They don't breed until they are four years old so there is time to gather and feed.

The Oystercatcher is a long-lived bird. One nestling ringed in Lincolnshire was caught forty years, one month and two days later, still striding along the same shoreline. What changes it must have seen. Around the time the bird was ringed, oystercatchers were regarded as a pest, accused of decimating cockle numbers. In Wales, a licence was issued to kill them. In 1973, 7000 oystercatchers were shot with a bounty paid of 25p a head. In Norfolk, at the same time, fishermen were landing catches of around 500 to 800 tonnes of cockles a month. An oystercatcher can eat around 500 cockles a day. We no longer shoot oystercatchers and the shellfish industry is impacted more by pollution and a changing climate.

Oystercatchers still parade along the mudflats of the Norfolk coast but their numbers are declining. The population is down fifteen per cent in the last decade. A mixture of factors is to blame, including over-fishing and the resulting disappearance of intertidal mussel and cockle beds, habitat loss on their wintering grounds due to land reclamation, pollution and human disturbance, and a warming climate changing their feeding and wintering patterns. Back in the 1930s, the birds were so plentiful that writers recorded pasture being chequered black and white with piebald oystercatchers, standing hunch backed and half asleep, or an entire rugby pitch covered by wintering flocks. My childhood study continued into the autumn when flocks round the Wash and Norfolk coast are full of juveniles and joined by over-wintering visitors. In September, the very highest tides push thousands of waders together; knot, oystercatcher, sanderling, godwit, plover, all jostling for position, bursting into flight as the tide squeezes upwards. They settle in a noisy crescendo of calls which rise across the tideline; then they fall silent.

In 1951, the RSPB sent a detailed account of its competition, initiated in 1902, to UNESCO. They believed the protection and enhancement of wildlife depended just as much on the spread of interest in wildlife as the purchase of sanctuaries. The RSPB said: "The child who watches birds does not want to destroy them." I was awarded my Montagu Scott medal

for the *Bird and Tree* competition in 1963; perhaps the judges were won over by the package of plaster oystercatcher bills and feet which accompanied my essay. My time with the oystercatcher has stayed with me. Even now, I still lie awake listening to their night-time chorus and look for them on shorelines, hoping to see one fly low across the surf.

And I still have the medal, my souvenir of the Sea-pie.